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Only a Face
and other tales
By Mrs Alexander Fraser

ONLY A FACE,

AND

Other Tales.



ONLY A FACE,

AND

Other Tales.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER,

AUTHOR OF

"NOT WHILE SHE LIVES," "FAITHLESS," "DENISON'S WIFE," ETC.

"Dum vivimus, vivamus."



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7

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
ONLY A FACE	1
BEE DARRELL	16
FIGURELLA : A WAIF	59
EVE	114
LA GITANA	130
FRAGMENTS OF A BROKEN LIFE	164
THE SIN OF MAUDE CONYERS	174
THE CURSE OF TYRRELL	220
AN EPISODE OF THE EAST	247
THE MARQUISE DE L'ORME	252
SYBIL ASHTON	276
JUST A DREAM	315
MY SISTER ALICE	327

2

1



ONLY A FACE.



WAS sauntering slowly homewards one night, about half-past eleven, after having attended at the Adelphi Theatre, in common with my brethren of the Press, the first representation of a drama by a very popular author.

Cigar in mouth, and in deep cogitation as to the sort of critique that the new piece deserved in the columns of the next day's *Daily Tatler*, I was startled by a hand being laid gently on my arm—just touching me ever so lightly and no more. My eyes rested on the hand—gloveless, but resembling a fairy snowflake—then my gaze wandered farther on towards its owner's face, and there it remained for a moment or so, spellbound. Big soft eyes, with their iris as deeply violet as the petals of a heartsease, and with their lids fringed with long curling lashes, looked deprecatingly into mine. Bright chestnut hair waved freely off a low white brow, surmounting a little Greek nose and a rosebud mouth, slightly open, showing a row of glistening teeth.

Only a face, nothing more; but the face of a woman angel! Who could she be? I wondered to

myself, this Titania, this embodiment of a poet's dream, this delicate apparition, this lonely waif—wandering in the evil London streets, side by side with unblushing effrontery and hideous flaunting vice?

Not one of *that* sisterhood, I divined at a glance, as she stood shyly beside me, and spoke in hesitating accents.

"Oh, sir, where is Charing Cross Station? I have lost my way, and it is very late!"

"Charing Cross! Why, you must have passed it, I fancy."

"Passed it? But I was so frightened!" and she shot a furtive, nervous glance over her shoulder.

Noting the suggestive movement, I too turned round, and saw that the poor child had apparently fallen into the camp of the Philistines.

Close behind us, eyeing the girl, stood a short, thick-set man, dark-browed, and with the prominent features that appertain to the tribe of Israel.

Evidently nothing but a "roaring lion seeking whom he may devour," a vulture in pursuit of a dove.

My resolution was taken at once. Looking at my watch, I said—

"Where do you wish to go?"

"To Spa Road."

"Come along, then; we have just time enough, I think, to catch the last train."

And leaving the discomfited "*Moses*" *planté*, I walked quickly off with an angel—but an angel in a stuff dress and an unpretending straw bonnet—trudging along by my side. In a few minutes we were seated in a first-class carriage—its solitary occupants.

The respectability of my exterior had undoubtedly had its proper effect, for the rosy lips no longer trem-

bled, and a reassured look reigned in the pretty violet eyes.

"How come you to be out so late all alone?" I asked her gently, curbing as well as I was able any undue curiosity that was lurking in my breast, and throwing as much deference into my manner as though I was addressing the Grande Duchesse herself. I could see that it never even entered her brain to question any legitimate right of mine in putting the query.

Lavater himself must have been a terrible impostor indeed, if guile, or any *arrière pensée*, could have existed with that candid brow, that countenance open as the day.

"My father has been very ill, and he was worse to-day," she replied at once, and the repressed quiver of the childlike mouth, and the pained expression that flitted across her face, carried with them the conviction of her truth; "and I went to call on a doctor in Brook-street that we were told was the very best one we could consult; but I found that he had gone out—to a 'grand party,' the servants said—and after waiting three hours, I had to come away, without seeing him."

Some swell medico, I surmised: probably a fashionable "physician to the Queen," at whose palatial residence a countess in ermine and velvet would be received by cringing powdered lacqueys bowing obsequiously to rank and fine plumage, whilst a gentlewoman, but a gentlewoman habited in a russet gown, an unprotected girl seeking relief for a dying parent, was made to sit long hours in a comfortless hall, surrounded by rude hirelings.

Oh, most supreme justice! I ejaculated inwardly.

How true it is that in this, to coin a word, "syco-phantic" world, only

"From high life high characters are drawn!"

"What is your father's ailment? Perhaps *I* may know of some physician," I said; and then curiosity got the better of discretion, and with the wiliness of the tempter of Eve, I added, "What name shall I ask for, if I succeed in finding one to accompany me to your house?"

"Oh, how good you are!" she cried, gratefully. "Lister is the name. My father is an artist—an excellent artist;" and her face brightened up into perfect radiance as she dilated on his genius. "Many of his paintings have been in the Exhibition; but since he fell ill he has not been able to devote himself to his art at all, and we have no money; that is—" she interrupted herself hastily, whilst a deep flush swept over her cheek—"we are not quite so well off as we were, and we do not know many people, for my mother's time is so much taken up with attending on my poor father, that she is unable to go out and see friends."

Oh how my heart bled for the child, as all unconsciously and artlessly she revealed in her innocent words the terrible poverty and anxiety that filled her home life!

By this time we had reached our destination—a small but clean-looking house in Spa Road. A face looked hurriedly out of a window as we rang the bell, and a woman's voice exclaimed—

"It is Nellie at last, thank God!"

I clasped her hand for a moment as I said good-
and slipped into it my card with "Mr. Mark

Fleming, 4, Arundel Street, Strand," neatly engraved upon it; and then I had to charter a vehicle, for there were no more trains that night, to take me home and to bed, where I might dream of "only a face."

Three days slowly lagged on their course, crawling snail-like enough, as I vainly attempted to devote my attention to my usual avocations. During the whole of the time I was perpetually haunted by that face—Nellie's face; for already, after the fashion of lovers, I had begun to call her Nellie to myself.

It did not in the least signify what subject I wrote on, or what interesting matter I studied, a vision stood ever beside me with violet eyes looking pleadingly out of their great depths into mine. So extraordinary a change had feverish fancy wrought in my usually prosaic and somewhat matter-of-fact temperament, that my imagination became affected: and in moments of "temporary insanity," to use an exaggerated term, I caught myself actually listening, with a painful tension of the nerves of my organ of hearing, for a flutter of starry wings which might bear away my angel from me.

I tried to argue sapiently with myself.

"Mark Fleming," I said, "can it be possible that any amount of sense you flatter yourself you possess, has been dispersed to the four winds at your mature age of thirty-five by only a face? Nothing more! The face, too, of a girl over whose bright head not more than half your years have rolled! *Cui bono?*—this insane infatuation, this following of a will-o'-the-wisp. Marriage, that usual ultimatum and desideratum of feelings such as you are indulging in, would be simply a ridiculous mistake. May and December

wedded together make but a sorry pair. Shake yourself up, Mark, and don't be such an egregious fool! Descend from the regions of shadowy visions; return to earnest healthy life, and forget—what? 'Only a face' after all."

Not so easy; the spirit was willing, amenable to the mandates of reason; but the flesh was horribly, terribly weak. Like the anecdote of the old woman and the gin-palace, for three days I had manfully resisted putting myself in the way of temptation; on the fourth I was forced to treat resolution.

I remembered the address of an old chum of mine, whom I knew to be on the top of the ladder in his profession; and at half-past three we were steaming away together towards Elysium, *alias* Spa Road.

Spa Road, my oasis in the desert, the nest that contained my bird of Paradise, the tiny speck of earth in which bloomed the loveliest flower, an "exotic of celestial birth that should have only blossomed in celestial air." Already I but knew

"Two separate worlds: the one, that small
Beloved and consecrated spot
Where 'Nellie' was; the other, all
The dull wide waste where she was not."

Many a sensational romance it had been my province to criticise and cut up, but none of them had ever approached one-millionth portion of a hairbreadth to the romance my own brain had woven in absurdity and want of common sense; for although not a fop by any manner of means, the imperious demands of civilization had entailed on me, in common with others of my sex, the necessity of looking occasionally into a mirror; and I was fully aware that though I was not

a dwarf or humpbacked, or marked with the smallpox, or even outrageously unpleasant to the human eye, that Dame Nature had not been especially prolific in her gifts as to my personal appearance; that, in fact, I was a long way off from being an Adonis, or on account of my attractions an *enfant gâté* of the feminine sex.

Thirty-five, and not handsome; what right had I then to think of Nellie even, unless in a purely paternal fashion? And just as I had arrived at this cheerful conclusion, my friend the doctor and I found ourselves on the top of the stairs of Nellie's house.

Reclining on a sofa that was drawn close up beside the window, with the summer light falling upon each feature, was Mr. Lister. Death was imprinted on his thin face. Consumption in its deadliest form had singled him for its victim. One glance revealed that the case was utterly hopeless—that a few more months at farthest would find him calmly sleeping the long, long sleep from which there is no awakening. His eyes were closed, and his hand lay clasped in his wife's, who sat close beside him: a fragile, careworn woman, with the remains of a loveliness that in youth must have surpassed the beauty that her daughter now possessed.

The angel herself, in the neatest of cotton dresses, stood awaiting our entrance in the shy and graceful attitude of a gazelle. I sat there for half an hour, lifted out of earth into heaven, receiving in a beatific dream the thanks of the parents for my kindness. I mechanically put on my hat and gloves, and went through the ceremony of saying good-bye; but still in a dream, with my eyes seeing nothing but a "face,"

with Nellie herself filling the whole of my poor foolish old heart. It was all up with me. I was madly in love !

What was the good of struggling with myself ? My love for Nellie was absurd, but gigantic ; hopeless, yet a painful joy to myself. The once or twice a week that I went to Spa Road were white days in the calendar of my life. I was no longer bluff in speech, honest in purpose. Love had enticed me into a state of deceitfulness of which I was thoroughly ashamed ; and many an hour was passed in finding pretexts or concocting purely imaginary reasons for calling on the Listers. The only salve I had to my reproachful conscience was the sight of the invalid father's genuine enjoyment of the hothouse grapes and other comestibles that I invariably carried with me to insure my presence being acceptable ; for, in spite of the earnest cordiality with which I was ever welcomed, passion's timidity dispersed all the little self-reliance I had, and made me doubly distrustful of my own captivations. One afternoon, on entering the little sitting-room, I was surprised to find a visitor whom I had never met before—a tall young man, whose proportions were more strapping than elegant in my eyes ; but the dawn of jealousy probably made me survey him through a sort of yellow fog.

" Mr. Fleming, Mr. Urling," in Mrs. Lister's gentle tones, and I and my rival—for an instinctive feeling told me he was Nellie's lover—were formally introduced to each other ; and then I sat myself down with an " all-overishness " about me to analyse his *defects*. I did not like the young giant's looks : there was a decided boldness about his countenance which

was positively repulsive to me. Physically he was a fine animal, but with no thoroughbred points about him. There was a repellent familiarity in his address too that irritated me, and made me pugnaciously inclined towards the cane with a showy knob which he aggravatingly "twiddled" round and round in his broad red hand. I was either *de trop*, or else I had the misfortune to be a wet blanket; for conversation lagged terribly, and after a few minutes the gentleman made his adieux, accompanied to the door by my hostess.

I remained sole monarch of all I surveyed for a while, hoping that Nellie would put in an appearance; but not a bit of it—"hope had only told a flattering tale," and when the door reopened it was to admit Mrs. Lister.

"Nellie is out, Mr. Fleming; very provoking, for she knew Mr. Urling might call, as it's Saturday, and the City offices close early. What do you think of him?" And the good lady folded her hands quietly in her lap, and looked me full in the face, as she placidly asked the question. And there I was, conscious that I was, at five-and-thirty years of age, blushing like a great awkward schoolboy, who was being catechized before a roomful of people. So Nellie *had* something in common with this handsome Goliath, or else her presence or absence on that particular afternoon would scarcely have been a subject of pleasure or regret to her mother. I felt that I hated the fellow with a fierce heathenish hatred. But I had to repress the feelings that kept bubbling up worse than any eruption of a volcanic mountain, and to say calmly—

"I think he is a very fine young man, ma'am."

"Yes," she answered mildly, and a little disconnectedly, "a *very* fine young man—so good-looking, and in love with Nellie for two years. He is a son of Urling and Co.—at least of Urling himself—the great jewellers in Oxford Street, you know; retired, of course. And a large fortune; keep their own carriage in a nice place at Staines. Alfred is the eldest, and is in an "oil" business, likely to become a partner in a few years. But Nellie, though I *am* her mother, and shouldn't say it, is a *very* good girl, but so strong-headed."

Strong-headed! what on earth did that mean? Had Nellie determined *for* or *against* the match, with the oily young man?

"If Miss Lister likes him, and he is eligible, why doesn't she marry him?"

"That's it—if she likes him; but she doesn't seem to know more than the babe unborn her own feelings. You see, Mr. Fleming, my husband's health is not very good, and I am not strong. It would be a comfort to us both to know Nellie had a good kind husband, who would take care of her if we were taken away. She has a great respect and liking for you."

Oh how I winced at those words! They made me feel so much as if I was her godfather.

"And if *you* would advise her to marry Mr. Urling, she might think seriously over it. Now, stay and have a cup of tea; and when she comes in, I'll leave you to do your best."

"Not to-day, Mrs. Lister; I have an unavoidable engagement, which *can't* be put off. I will call again soon," I managed to stammer out, as I shuffled rather than walked out of the room.

What a tumult raged in my breast as I wended my

way back to town ! *I*, who worshipped the very earth that my darling trod on—*I*, to whom she was everything in the wide, wide world—was to use my influence to drive her entirely out of *my* life into another's arms ! I could have yelled aloud at the preposterous notion of such a self-sacrifice. True, I dared not dream that she could ever be mine ; but why, in the name of all the Don Quixotes, should I, against my own interest, coerce her, and coax her to become another man's wife ?

The very thought of such an event roused up a thousand demons hammering and knocking within my soul, and plunged me into unutterable misery. But "after dark the light will come," as Boucicault tells us ; and the recollection that if "persuasion" was necessary to bring on the match, it was positive that there was no love in her heart for the suitor, pulled me up again from the slough of despond.

After a fortnight I went again to the house. I was ushered into an empty room ; but presently Nellie came in. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were heavy, and her lids swollen from recently-shed tears. After shaking hands with me, instead of our customary chat, she turned away, a little brusquely, I fancied, and stood gazing out of the window. Now Spa Road, though a charming spot in my enamoured fancy, had certainly no particular attractions in the way of scenery or fashions ; so that I could only surmise that she wanted to avoid our inevitable tête-à-tête.

My wounded feelings prompted me to a malicious course of conversation ; of which, however, I was soon made to be ashamed, coming off a crestfallen wretch, instead of a victor with flying colours.

"Miss Lister," I said, going up to her, and putting

on a highly jocular tone, and mustering up an extremely facetious expression on my physiognomy, whilst my heart was thumping and bumping up and down beneath my waistcoat with leviathan force, "your mother asked me to use my persuasive powers to induce you to reward Mr. Urling's attachment with your hand." And I took the little white palm in mine with a Grandisonian grace that *ought* to have been completely overpowering; but it evidently missed its mark, for she snatched it away from me with a strange vehemence in her manner, and with an angry flashing light in her violet orbs that gave quite a new phase to her beauty. As an angel she was perfect; but the glimpse of devilry that sparkled momentarily in her een rendered her, if possible, doubly dangerous to my poor peace of mind.

"So *you* advise me to marry Mr. Urling, whom I not only dislike, but have a contempt for! *You* think it no sin, then, to go to the altar with a lie upon your lips, and to promise to cling to a man whom you would prefer never to look upon at all! I thought better of you, Mr. Fleming—better of your judgment, better of your heart; for I *did* fancy that you had some little feeling for me, a little friendship at any rate." And she burst out crying.

What *was* to become of me? A dozen tongues seemed struggling within me for speech; a million tongues could never have uttered all my love, all my adoration for her. But something kept me silent. Afterwards I knew what that "something" was—the horrible fear of *certainty*, if that certainty was antagonistic to my happiness. And so I stood stock-still, appearing probably in her eyes as interesting as a block of ice or a senseless log of wood.



Regaining her composure by an effort, she resumed : " Well, Mr. Fleming, I cannot blame you for doing what mamma asked you ; I *will* try and like Mr. Urling ; and perhaps I shall succeed—who knows ? " she said, with a bitter little smile upon her lip. " And the next time you call you may have to congratulate me. But I must go now, and will send mamma to thank you better than I can do. Good-bye, Mr. Fleming." And just touching the tips of my cold fingers, she glided out of the room.

I followed her down the stairs, then noiselessly let myself out of the house.

* * * * *

For some weeks I persisted in my diurnal work ; but my brain kept throbbing, and there was a strange singing in my ears ; and lassitude crept over me, and appetite went away.

Then one morning, as I sat listlessly in my arm-chair, my buxom landlady came in dropping her curtsey, and desiring her matutinal chat.

" Lord, sir ! "—she had been staring hard at my visage for a few minutes with more curiosity than politeness—" why, I *do* believe as how you are going to be very ill ! I never saw anybody look so unearthly-like in all my born days. And you never eat anything now, Mr. Fleming ; not if I do your bacon myself, and send it up nice and brown to a turn ; no, here it is, sir, and untouched ! " she exclaimed in a plaintive tone, whose pathos, little inclined as I was for mirth, tickled my risible faculties.

" Never mind about my appetite, Mrs. Robson ; I am all right enough. I want you to put these flowers and fruit into a basket, and despatch them at once to Mrs. Lister, Maryville Cottage, Spa Road."

"Of course I will, sir, directly. And now do go and lie down quietly; you look as white as your own ghost, and are no more fit to be worriting over those newspaper articles than the shoeblack at the corner."

I took the good woman's advice and went to bed, feeling that it was useless to attempt work. My head was aching as if the "Anvil Chorus" of the *Trovatore* was being performed upon it, and my limbs felt as though I had been stretched upon the rack in the chamber of Inquisition for ninety-nine days.

That night I became insensible; for several long days, they told me afterwards; then I began to toss about in delirium, raving madly and incessantly.

It was one evening (shall I ever forget it?) about seven o'clock. The summer had not yet gone by, and the last lingering beams of the sun fell through my window upon my room. The pain in my head was gone, leaving a dull numbness behind; and my strength was no greater than a little child's. The weight was still on my heart, though I could barely realize its cause, so utterly prostrate I felt.

Silence reigned around; and wearily closing the lids I had scarcely opened, I turned on my pillow. Then a soft cool hand was passed gently over my hot forehead, and a fragrant breath swept over me.

Who could she be? I wondered. Not a hireling surely, with so kind and light a touch. I opened my eyes wide and looked up, and saw—only a face! but hers—Nellie's! What could it all mean? Was I dead, and had my angel come to bear me to heaven?

"Are you going to be married?" I exclaimed feverishly, with the blood flaming up in my face, and my pulse galloping.

"No, Mark, no—unless it is to you!" and she put



her two arms round my neck and softly kissed my cheek. And then she added, shyly: "Mrs. Robson came and told us how ill you were, and that your poor weak voice was always calling Nellie! Nellie! So mamma and I came to nurse you by turns. You have said often enough in your ravings how much you love me, dear. Say it again, now that you have regained your senses, and I shall be the happiest girl on earth!"

Oh, *could* it be true? Yes, I *felt* it was, as with the little strength that was left me I drew her passionately to my breast.

* * * * *

As I am writing this manuscript, my wife is peeping over my shoulder. I look up and see—"only a face," but the face of a woman angel!





BEE DARRELL.

CHAPTER I.

IN a sky of darkling crimson, blent here and there by Nature's cunning hand with a few soft feathery clouds, Hesperion was just trembling, pale and faint, into life as the solemn strains of the antiphony floated out full and sonorous into the evening gloam from Darrell Church.

A quaintly picturesque and antique church of pure Gothic build, with heavy clusters of broad-leaved ivy covering and overhanging the huge grey stone buttresses, and with small square windows, ruby and amber stained, and of mediæval design.

The long aisles and scantily-filled pews looked dark and dreary, and their still occupants presented an aspect somewhat weirdlike in the shimmering twilight amidst the deep quietude that reigned in the building; in which, even through the drowsy tones of the preacher, it was easy to hear the leaflets fluttering against one another in the summer wind, the resonant voices of the children playing on the village green, and the hoarse "caw caw" of the rooks upon the summit of the old church roof.

Up in the narrow gallery—that seemed to rest mid air, while parts of it were even partially lost in the pervading gloom—a man sat leaning forwards, with big muscular arms crossed tightly over a broad chest, and with eyes dreamily absorbed in the scene below him. A man wonderfully handsome, though without owning any strict regularity of feature; with honesty of purpose shining out of the great dark eyes, and with truth playing on the well-cut lips, that, in spite of the quiet power of the face, were as soft and tender in expression as a woman's. It was a countenance that invited trust, and would never betray it. Looking upon him, you fell at once to wondering what manner of history his life contained. It did not require much proficiency in the art of anthroposcopy to find out that Frank Standish *had* a character, although to analyse that character properly might have been a much more arduous task. It would have been difficult for a spectator to have divined the tenor of his thoughts from his face now; he might have been thinking possibly of days long gone by, brought back to his memory by a stray waft of scented lilacs borne to him by the breeze—days perhaps that had been so sad and so desolate, that he would have fain thrust their recollection into Lethe, and drowned the bitter feelings they evoked in a draught of that anodyne—oblivion; or he might perchance have been wandering far from religion into an untimely dream of a terrestrial paradise, with some sweet Eve by his side.

His eyes first rested on a tiny twig tapping gently against the panes; then scanned carelessly the placid physiognomy of the Reverend Hugh Dacres, as though his ear did not take in much of a not very erudite

discourse from the Ephesians ; then they wandered to and finally settled upon the figure of a slim girl, on whom a gleam fell from the coloured casement anent her, lighting up shy grey orbs and pale pure features like a youthful saint's, with thick black lashes resting closely and demurely upon marble cheeks.

Standish looked down upon her face, and as he looked an unutterable softness—a sort of tremulous tenderness—crept over his own.

His life had been lonely from boyhood. His mother was the only being he had ever truly loved, and when her dead form was carried away from his sight for ever, his heart had seemed to shrink within itself, as it were ; and although he had registered no vow of celibacy, no bright or beaming woman's face had displaced the image with wan lineaments and silvered hair that was enshrined in his inmost soul. But now in the twilight he was picturing to himself that slight white-robed figure flitting like a sunbeam in and out of an old-fashioned cottage, whose diamond-paned windows were enframed in masses of dark foliage that cast a pleasant but chequered shade within, and created queer arabesques of light beneath his feet. He was fancying he saw that pure white face brightening into smiles at his approach, hiding its gladness upon his breast, leaning its wealth of tresses on his shoulder, and growing nearer and nearer to his heart each hour of his life.

Dreams ! glorious but fantastical ; born of folly, woven by hope, and, in truth, only heralds of disappointment and despair ; but he lost himself in them until the final benediction recalled him to a sense of where he was ; and from under the jetty lashes he



caught a fleeting glance as Nell Dacres, with the rest of the congregation, passed quietly out of the church.

By the time Standish had descended the stairs, the building was well-nigh deserted, and the white-robed angel of heaven he had conjured up for himself had disappeared from view.

Outside the church porch stood a small phaeton, and by it a woman's figure, tall, and richly dressed.

As Frank's footsteps resounded on the gravel path she turned suddenly towards him; then, even as he gazed eagerly, she stepped into the carriage, and was quickly out of sight. Her face seemed to flash upon him like a fate—a radiant fate! A brilliant beautiful picture, she had stood before him for an instant, with sunlit hair gleaming up like a crown of gold in the half-dusk, and with vivid peachy tints showing up the deep rich violet of her eyes.

Frank's breath came short and fast; for a moment his heart throbbed hard with a decrotic motion it had never felt before, and he wondered what it could be that ailed him.

Could the strange overpowering thralldom of his senses and captivation of his imagination be a sudden commingling of two human souls, or the insanity that belonged to unripe years, namely, "love at first sight?" he asked himself wrathfully, scorning the miserable deficiency in moral strength that could succumb to mere womanly beauty. Then he hurriedly and somewhat unevenly traversed the main road, and walked homewards through the peaceful country lanes, with none but the sleepy birds to mark the unwonted flush that burned upon his cheeks; but as he lifted the latch of the gate that led up to his domicile, something seemed to draw him back; a feeling new-

born, but full of strength, arrested his steps. It was a dread to find himself at home and alone with that brilliant face in his mind; and an earnest desire, that seemed to him ridiculously inadequate to the occasion, seized him to try and shake off at once and for ever the curious tenacious hold that the vision had taken of him. So, after a pause, he slowly retraced his way and entered the parsonage—a long, low, white house, with irregular gables overhanging the windows, that opened upon a large primitive garden with narrow paths and stiff-clipped yew-trees, and grassy mounds bedecked with blood-red carnations, and tall lilies with graceful heads and golden bosoms.

As the hours of the evening wore on, the bewildering emotions that the momentary apparition had produced faded partially from Frank's memory, as, within a window wreathed in lavish tangles of wild-rose, with the subtle fragrance of invisible flowers stealing up from outside, he sat with Nell Dacres' little white hand close clasped within his own, while, by the light Hesperion gave, he watched the black lashes kiss a blushing face, and a happy smile flit over the softest, sweetest lips in the world. Only once the vision came back to him vividly, and that was when a star-gleam, glancing athwart Nell's raven tresses, flashed them for an instant into the golden glory that *its* head had worn. And he said, blaming himself inwardly for his indulgence in a dangerous curiosity but feeling himself helpless to refrain from it—

"I saw a new face this evening near Darrell Church; I wonder who it could have been."

To save his life he knew he could not have satisfied himself in a direct straightforward manner, although he burnt with impatience to hear her name.

"Perhaps it was Mr. Morris, the new tenant of Goldthorn Farm," Nell suggested. "Was the person short and stout, and altogether very uninteresting?"

Standish could not repress a shudder. Somehow it seemed to hurt him to listen to such words in conjunction with the being in his thoughts, although he knew of course that they could in no wise be applicable to her.

He could not speak for a little while, and then, in spite of his efforts, his voice shook just a little, and he looked out into the garden as he replied—

"It was a lady, Nell, and rather a pretty one."

And then he fell to despising himself for the meanness that could utter falsehood, when he recollected that "faint praise is more damning than censure." "Rather a pretty one!" he reiterated to himself angrily. Maddening in her beauty, he should have said; but he dared not speak his *soul*, sitting there beneath the starlight, that looked so inexpressibly pure and calm and holy, by its contrast with the wild passions of human nature, and with his affianced wife within his circling arm.

"I know who it was!" exclaimed Nell Dacres suddenly, with unwonted animation in her gentle voice. "It was Beatrice Darrell—'Queen Bee,' as she used to be called as a child. Oh, Frank!"—and in her enthusiasm she clasped her pretty hands together in a devotional attitude that suited her style admirably—"is she not beautiful and bright as an angel?"

Standish looked down at her; his nature had one weakness that amounted to a blemish; his feelings were slaves to that which pleased his eye. It might have been that he was a born artist, and that his

perception of the "beautiful" was keener than other men's, and ruled his imagination more than mere material form and colouring should do; but there was an innate refinement and delicacy in his organization which restricted the influence of "beauty" to his "imagination" exclusively, and prevented him from falling into sensualism.

"Not half such an angel as you are, dear," he whispered softly; and the girl, to hide the gratification his words gave her, leant out and plucked a rose, and busied herself with fastening it into his coat.

A little later, after pressing his good-night on her red lips at the garden gate beneath the liquid lustre of a big yellow moon, he went to rest with Nell Dacres' Madonna-like face kept determinedly before him; but when human resolution had melted away in sleep, it was Bee Darrell who haunted him all through the night in long and feverish dreams.

CHAPTER II.

THE Darrells of Darrell Court were prouder of their pedigree than any family in the United Kingdom. The first from whom they dated was a famous Count Guy D'Arrelle, who in the year 1690 commanded a body of picked men sent over by King Louis XIV. to aid James Stuart in retaining his crown. Brave as Bassompierre, lavish as Lauzun, and voluptuous as Trimalcyon of ancient days, Count Guy was a soldier of true mettle, and after many a wonderful feat of prowess and valour, he met a soldier's glorious death at the battle of Aughrim, side by side, and, tradition saith, hand clasped in hand with his old friend and



gallant leader St. Ruth, leaving a son who settled in one of the English shires, and married the daughter of a grand but impoverished duke.

As time wore on, and the family became naturalized Britons, the old name, bereft of the "de" that in Gallic guaranteed birth and blood, became anglicized into Darrell; but pride, lavishness, and love of pomp descended from generation to generation without change or abatement.

The exchequer of the Darrells was not, however, so weighty as their pedigree, and for years the strictest inward economy had been essential to sustain necessary outward appearances. Fortunately Providence had willed that the line should be carried on by females, the husband of each having been forced to assume the old name, and no spendthrift heirs had thus mortgaged the glorious old estate: which however was woefully neglected from pressure of finances. But though Darrell Court was very dilapidated, and indeed in some parts scarcely habitable, yet a sense of obligation due to "noblesse" kept up a certain grandeur in the household arrangements. The meals, though frugal, sometimes hardly exceeding "a dinner of herbs," were yet served-up in good old silver by powdered lacqueys, who contemptuously regarded the commonplace fare on its transit from the kitchen to the noble banqueting hall, in which the roof above occasionally let in rain as well as sunshine. The enormous griffins that reared their eagle heads on leonine forms on either side of the grand portal were minus their proper proportions, and the great stone garland of "fleur de lys" that encircled the "D'Arrelle" crown was broken as though the hand of a cruel foe had striven to crush the form of the flowers and the symmetry of the leaves into an un-

seemly mass, while the crown itself, black with age, looked gloomy and funereal.

The dry moat that surrounded the Court was a grave for the fallen leaves that died in splendid ceremonies of yellow and brown and crimson beneath the chill autumnal sunshine, and the shrubberies and gardens were a jungle of sweets untended by human skill, while masses of hardy glechoma hid unsightly walls and gaping crevices from view of the mullioned windows.

On the terrace wall, by the side of a tall orange-tree, leant "Bee," sole daughter of the Darrells' "house and heart," and heiress to their pride and penury. The last beams of the setting sun were lingering over her head, whose sympathetic brightness seemed to arrest them. The charm of her beauty was in the perfect radiance that emanated from every feature of her face. The deep violet eyes appeared to laugh into your own, and the arch face literally flashed out with smiles. She was conversing with a man who leant over the wall in an indolent attitude, and whose gaze was riveted on the scarlet lips as she spoke. Her feelings for Cyril Mayne, had they been properly analysed, would not have exposed to view a single soft point about them. And in spite of the gentle words and beaming smiles with which she fed him, now and then, an acute observer might have often detected a frown cross rapidly over the ivory forehead, and the little white teeth pressed almost fiercely down upon the ripe under lip, that looked as if a "a bee had newly stung it." It could scarcely have been the personal appearance of her companion that displeased her; for Mayne was a good-looking man, with a lithe elegant figure, and an insouciance in his manner that



sat well upon him, and showed him at once to be an habitué of "good society." His eyes looked out lazily but good-temperedly, and his facile mouth had a pleasant expression. But notwithstanding his attractions, Bee cared for him no more than if he had been as repellent as a satyr. He had for her but one salient recommendation—he was *rich*; and that word of four letters contained his passport to Bee's favour. The only daughter of the Darrells, imbued by Nature with family pride and ambition, and nurtured in the midst of galling economies that assimilated but ill with her grandiose notions and aspirations, had long ago breathed a vow, with a solemnity that would have befitted a better cause, that her earthly god should be "gold." Gold, by which she could renovate the home whose every stone she loved so well, and by the aid of which she could reach the pinnacle of fashion and position that she deemed her natural sphere by right of birth and beauty.

Even as a child, when regally lording it over her playmates, with her little figure drawn up to its fullest height, and her violet orbs flashing imperiously, until she cowed them with her liliputian majesty into being always greeted as "Queen Bee," she could chafe angrily in her heart at the mockery of the sobriquet, although outwardly she would sustain the appellation to perfection.

She knew that she was proud and patrician, but she also knew too well that she was a "pauper." And the miserable indignity of the last deteriorated greatly from the pleasure of being well-born. Yet, if she had been put to the test, she would not have given up her noble lineage for all the contents of the English Mint.

She did not feel one atom of love for Mayne ; but the glitter of his wealth blinded her vision, and she could not relinquish the gratification of possessing it. Simply a woman, with all the terrible weakness and instability that sometimes belong to woman's nature, she was dazzled by the richness of the frame into overlooking the deficiencies in the picture it surrounded. But she was in no haste to rivet matrimonial manacles on her alabaster arms, even though they were to be made of purest metal. She only wished to keep the mine open as an El Dorado in case of necessity. So she smiled at him often when her brow was frowning, and uttered soft nothings while her very soul revolted against the deceitful part she was acting. But the smiles were baits to the glittering fish she desired to feel upon her hook, and once there, she knew she could play with him like an expert angler, until the time when she should require to land him safely beside her.

"The Court is a charming place," Mayne said rather languidly, as he looked down on the tangle of foliage, shining bronze in the sunset, and at the gigantic elms and oaks that skirted the domain, and stood here and there royal and sturdy, like so many strong props to the falling house.

Cyril had *pur sang* running through his veins, and he was quite capable of appreciating the mournful beauty and decaying grandeur of the old place and its surroundings. But his motive in eulogizing its charms was not to display the artistic resources he possessed ; it was simply an excuse for bringing home to Bee's mind the wonderful advantages that would accrue to her acres from some few thousands being expended upon them.



Bee, in spite of her apparent volatility, was perfectly alive to his meaning, although she wilfully appeared to misunderstand the drift of his remarks.

"But just look there, Miss Darrell!" he exclaimed with a tone of feigned surprise, as though the subject he alluded to had just struck him. "A wing on the left of the Court seems to have fallen in slightly. And actually some of the big grey-stones have injured the end of the terrace, and are scattered on the rosary walk. Only yesterday, as I walked through the grounds in a brown study, with my thoughts away—where, deponent saith not," and he glanced meaningly at her, while she turned haughtily from him—"I stumbled, at the peril of my life, over a heap of bricks that had evidently formed the side wall of the gate lodge. Then, no sooner had I recovered my equilibrium and my breath than over I went again upon some fine old trees, that must have been felled by mistake, I am sure."

Bee's cheeks flushed scarlet, and a scornful light filled her eyes. If she could have withered him by the lightning of her glance, she would willingly have done so then and there.

She thought the man was actually bold enough to beard the lion in his den, daring to assert such mean falsehoods, when he *must* have known that bricks and stones were not to be stuck together by an empty purse, and that the old trees, each branch and leaf and twig of which were so precious to her, had been cut down in their glory—not by mistake, but to help pay for the savoury dishes that composed his fare during his visit to the house of her father.

"People in their right senses do not usually indulge in silvan promenades with their eyes shut," she

snapped out very sharply. She felt inclined to crush him to powder beneath her military heel for his impertinence ; and there was a stinging sarcasm in her voice as she added, " Do you know, Mr. Mayne, I am so hopelessly stupid that I cannot comprehend how such swells as you are can bring yourselves to enter on such common vulgar topics as bricks and mortar, and paltry brushwood."

Cyril was too good-tempered to feel resentment at the tone she had assumed ; and he was a little posed at his move, which he had considered a wise one, having been so entirely in a wrong direction. So he smiled deprecatingly at her, and just a little foolishly, and then he hung over the parapet and hummed audibly, in rather indifferent tune, the ancient ditty, " Then teach me how to woo thee, love."

Bee stamped her little foot impatiently before he arrived at the end of the first verse ; then all of a sudden she recollected that her singing bird was only fluttering near, that he was not captured, and that if her mood did not change, he might spread his jewelled wings and fly out of her reach altogether.

" I am afraid I was captious, Mr. Mayne," she essayed to say amiably. " After all, it only shows a friendly interest in Darrell, your remarking one or two things that papa has overlooked. He is such an invalid, that he has no strength or energy to go through his banking accounts at present."

Cyril looked sympathizingly at her grave face ; but he could hardly restrain a laugh at the notion of Mr. Darrell's lacking the strength and energy to look over what would probably be a " blank." But he knew that this fact was his greatest help in arriving at the desideratum he had in view—namely, Bee herself.

"Miss Darrell, Bee!" he began nervously, "I know how dearly you love Darrell, and that no place, however beautiful, would find as much favour in your eyes as your home. But could you not make up your mind to become my wife and to put up with Mayne Towers until your father is stronger and capable of ordering necessary repairs to the Court? Mayne is not a bad place on the whole, Bee!" And he really looked loverlike and earnest, as he added, "And all you can desire in the world shall be yours, as mistress of it!" Then he heaved a great sigh of relief that the declaration that had been hovering for long on his lips had finally found language.

Bee was a little taken aback. She had, it was true, long ago made up her mind to be the suzeraine of Mayne Towers—but not yet, not yet. She felt as if she was stifling, although the pleasant summer breeze that came whistling through her ancestral trees lifted her golden hair off her temples, and fanned her hot face. She could not have bound herself for ever and aye at that moment to save her life. Somehow she felt as if his soft words, instead of touching her, had raised up a great hard barrier against him in her breast. She had never cared for him less than when he had for the first time looked really sincere, and had displayed some emotion in his usually vapid voice. And then her glance rested dreamily on the scene that lay around her, and her soul seemed to open, as it were, to the prospect of wealth, and to shut itself against womanly longing for a life of love. She would not give her suitor his *cong  *, but she could ask for reprieve, for a little reflection, ere she decided her fate for ever.

"You have taken me by surprise, Mr. Mayne.

Really I scarcely know how to answer you. We have been acquainted so short a time ; and I should not like to marry you until you know me better."

"Don't wait for that, Bee," he interrupted, hastily. "I am quite willing to risk my chance of happiness on the knowledge I have of you already."

"But," she said, hesitatingly, "I feel it would be best for both of us not to be hasty. If you really do like me, you can wait for me a little. Jacob served seven years for Rachel ; and when he was disappointed, he went on patiently for double that time, you know," she said, coquettishly, charming him by her manner.

"So be it. I am content to bide your time, so as at the end of it you become my wife, dearest Bee." And he took her hand, and tried to draw her gently towards him, thinking to seal the troth-pledge on her tempting lips.

But not a bit of it. Before he could imprint a kiss on her palm, she laughed brightly into his face, and glided quickly from the terrace into the great door of the house, that in the twilight yawned like a black chasm to receive her.

CHAPTER III.

NELL DACRES stood at the garden gate, after the parting beneath the big yellow moon, until Standish's figure had completely disappeared from view. Then she went back to her own little room, with her delicate cheeks flushed with brightest rose, just where Frank's last kisses had been pressed, and with his



murmured "Good-night" still lingering upon her shell-like ear.

She looked very sweet sitting there with her long black hair, loosened from the comb, streaming over her snow-white shoulders, and with one bare dimpled arm supporting her head as she indulged in a delicious reverie of love—love in its first flush and dawn, with its bloom all unbrushed by contact with the world, and unblemished by selfishness. Her mouth had half parted in a beatific smile, and the black lashes drooped over eyes filled with a happy light.

It was quite in the beginning of summer when she had leant against the bay-window, with tangled blossoms forming a variegated framework for her head, and had heard Frank ask her to be his wife. It was the month of August now, with gentle winds of the golden weather playing over the parsonage garden, and sweeping the fluttering leaves in rainbow heaps under the stately oaks that fringed the broad main road. The warm sun was scorching the nodding blades of the tall green grass down in the adjacent valley, and sending fierce beams right through heavy foliage, and gilding the eddying ripples of the mill-stream. And the sweet roses were red and blooming like Nell's own lips; and yet Frank Standish was an earnest lover still, and had not tired of whispering how dear she was to him. He spoke the truth, too. There was no deceit in his breast or falsehood on his tongue when he reiterated over and over again the vows that made her heart beat and her pulse throb so fast. Nell's gentle smile filled his soul with quiet content; and in her affection he found the "rest" that he had longed for all his life.

He had forgotten Bee Darrell; and the strange

influence her face had held over him for a short while had vanished like an unholy dream beneath the genial warmth and love that his betrothed gave him. And when she dilated on the sad fortunes of the family at Darrell Court, and expatiated with girlish enthusiasm on Bee's beauty and poverty, he listened to her words with no stronger emotion than pity for the fine old family and place thus falling to decay. Bee Darrell, he was told, was Nell's earliest friend, and the sweetest and best of created beings. True, she had lived a great deal in the world, and had been the acknowledged belle of brilliant London seasons; so that pleasure and admiration had naturally become in a manner essential to her existence. Like a child, she fretted after forbidden things; but she had been so courted and fêted all her life, that it would be marvellous indeed if she were not a little spoiled.

Bee had her faults, of course, like any other daughter of Eve; but her champion would aver, with an energy that excited Frank's amusement, that her virtues far exceeded her failings, that a pure and good soul shone out of her wondrous violet eyes, and played on her perfect features; and somehow, whenever Standish and his love were left in tête-à-tête, the theme of Bee Darrell was renewed and dwelt upon, until, at last, he began to look upon the radiant vision that had once dazzled his sight like an old familiar friend. And this was, perhaps, the wisest and best colouring that his fancy could have invested her in; for it brought him nearer the commonplace, divesting his mind of the romance it had conjured up, and removing the deep and curious impression she had made upon his imagination.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a warm and dreamy day in September, beneath a sky clear as Italia's own. The neglected gardens of Darrell Court blazed out with lavish gorgeous colouring under the vertical rays of the fervid sun, and the languid air came faint and heavy with the perfumed breath of the wild luxuriant blossoms. But down beneath the wide-spreading trees a few pleasant shadows lay, while near them an old broken fountain went plash-plash monotonously over the nude shoulders of a Dryad crowned with oak leaves and acorns. Just where the cool shadows slanted obliquely down, Bee sat on a fallen branch, plucking up spikes of grasses with a sort of impetuous grace, while her face, in its vivid tints, with the foliage behind it, looked like a tropical flower.

Nell Dacres lay on the turf close by, very white and statueque, and as quiet as a mouse. The two girls had agreed to pass a long afternoon together, and whilst Bee, in one of her most animated moods, conversed glibly, Nell was quite content to listen and be still.

"Poor dear old Darrell; you are too beautiful to be doomed to rack and ruin. I *must* save you, somehow." And then Bee gave a sharp sigh that ended in a curt laugh.

"Oh, Nell, what an awful thing poverty is!"

"It does not seem to me to be the great evil that *you* think it. Money would not make my happiness," said Nell, quietly.

"Because you have been brought up so differently,

in another atmosphere altogether, a far more healthy one. Ah, you could not guess what we go through in that palatial mansion, Nell!" and the colour died right out of the flower-like face, leaving it pallid, but pure as a lily.

The other girl looked up sympathizingly, and pressed the little clenched fist, full of green blades, to her lips.

"Are you *quite* happy and contented, Nell?"

"Quite." And Nell Dacres, as her thoughts flew at once to him who was the source of her greatest happiness, blushed roseate under the sunlight.

"I envy you with all my heart, then. Oh, if I could but drive ambition out of my head! What does Shakspeare say?"

"I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other;"

but it will not be driven out. I *must* have wealth, too—for myself, for Darrell!" and the last two words were accompanied by a yearning glance around. Then Bee tried to forget the pain in her heart by smiling; but it would not do, the smile was a very weak faint reflection of the beaming ones that parted her lips sometimes. And for a little while the girls were as still as the scene itself, and both were day-dreaming—one of riches, the other of love.

Then as the sun sank lower and lower, and the dark shadows lengthened upon the grass, Bee's melancholy vanished, and jumping off her lowly seat, she insisted on going back with Nell to the parsonage house. She was, in truth, anxious to lose sight of Cyril Mayne for a few hours, and longing to throw



off the incubus that his society had become to her. They had not strolled very far, however; through the perfumed thickets before they met him; and as Bee answered his eager greeting coldly and brusquely, all the dormant fire of his nature leapt into his handsome face, and with a grave bow he passed rapidly out of sight.

"Bee, you do not seem to like Mr. Mayne; yet he is always at Darrell," Nell remarked, as she noticed with astonishment a deep red spot glow on her friend's cheeks, and a sudden compression of her scarlet lips.

"Like him! I *hate* him! But I shall marry him all the same, if it is only to save my dear old home. Here we are at the parsonage. Nell, do not speak of him, I beseech you! Let me forget that he even exists; let me forget that I am only a poor wretched slave, to be sold to a rich bidder," she said, bitterly and impatiently. "Happiness and love are not for me. It is foolish of me to come here; for I shall only rebel against my evil fate more when I have had a glimpse of what *real* love is like, Nell," and she glanced significantly at the shadow of a man's tall figure upon the white window-blind.

Nell smiled as they entered the room with a consciousness of bliss immeasurable. And the original of the shadow, not perceiving Bee in the evening gloom, caught his betrothed in his arms, and pressed a fervent kiss on her bright face.

But Standish soon awoke to the presence of the visitor. He had seen faces of the old Masters, and his vivid imagination had often pictured the grand ideal of the lovely idyls of other days; but he had never gazed on his perfection of womanhood as he did now.

Bee's tangled hair gleamed out like shiny rings as she threw her hat down, and underneath them two big violet eyes beamed right into his own.

"I have seen you before, Mr. Standish," she said in ringing accents, that sounded to him like the warblings of an angelic choir.

"And I you," he answered laconically; but not a vestige of a smile crossed his mouth.

The old feeling had come back to him; the glamour of that enchanting face was over him again; and he felt the blood deserting his heart and surging up into his hot temples; and there was a plaintive cry in his breast, Why, oh why, had she come there? To weave afresh the spell of her beauty, to destroy the placid current of his life, to bring up maddening visions before him, that could never be realized upon earth.

"The moon is so brilliant to-night, it is a sin to shut her out," Bee said coaxingly, like a child; and she went to the window and drew back the curtain, and gazed up at the planet whose radiance paled by the sight of her own loveliness.

And all the while Standish stood in a maze, with his eyes riveted upon her form, and entirely forgetful of the assistance that politeness might have suggested. Then Bee stepped out into the fragrant garden; and Standish followed her, as though in a dream, regardless of Nell's very existence.

Bee plucked a big red rose, glistening with dew-drops, and placed it in her bosom, and then, either unconscious of, or else indifferent to, the presence of an auditor, she sang out low a little Italian serenade—an air full of wild passion and moving pathos, and with moonlight and music and unshed tears running through every bar of it. And Frank, starting, ground



his heel angrily on the turf as the thread of that lovely song was broken by Nell's voice bidding them come in to tea.

Bee, in spite of her apparent indifference, had too often read signs of her power on human faces not to recognise her influence now in the dark glowing eyes that met her own as the light fell upon them. And somehow, as she met that look, there was an unusual languor in her own eyes.

She had discerned at once that this man had a fervent but repressed nature, and that no woman had hitherto called out all that his heart *could* feel.

And Frank Standish recognised that it was useless to struggle with the storm of passion that had been evoked, and that, come weal, come woe, Bee Darrell was his fate.

CHAPTER V.

It was in the middle of autumn, and the big trees of Darrell stood up gaunt-armed and shorn of their natural beauty, while the red leaves kept drifting down, and down, and dying in the pale light within the dry old moat. And the tall white lilies and blood-hued carnations that Nell Dacres tended in the old-fashioned parterre grew perfumeless and withered. Only Frank Standish's love and longing for Bee Darrell waxed daily and hourly warmer and stronger.

And Bee ?

She did not tell him in words that she loved him ; but surely there was ample encouragement in her half-averted looks, in the gentle deference that she displayed towards him alone, with cheeks that crim-

soned at his voice. And yet through all Frank never failed to recognise full well that there was a something unattainable about her, and that he was but an outsider, unworthy to clasp her dainty palm. She leaned upon his arm, and listened with bent head to his low and incoherent whispers; and each instant laid his whole heart more and more under the siren spell she owned, until he forgot everything—honour, truth, and fealty—in the charmed hours he passed by her side.

The truth was, that Frank's honest and passionate devotion was infinitely sweet to the spoiled beauty, after the specious but tinselly flatteries that the great world gave; and she could not resist the gratification she experienced in the incense so lavishly and sincerely yielded up at her feet. She could not have been blind to the feelings in his breast; for it was impossible for him always to watch over himself, and to control the impulses that swept over him. Sometimes he would grasp hold of her hand, and then release it as quickly, with the faithful pleading look of a hound in his eyes—a sort of dumb deprecation of her wrath—and then he would meet a divine glance of pity, while she longed to say a gentle word, but dared not.

These *tête-à-têtes* were rare between them, and came like snatches of Paradise to Frank's heated imagination.

Nell usually formed a trio in the meetings; and whilst Bee sat dreamy and indolent, with Frank drinking in the melody of an occasional word and gazing unrebuked into the tender purple depths before him, Nell Dacres diligently worked at some portion of her marriage trousseau; and no ceremonies of the grave could have been more distasteful to Standish's view

than those fleecy fragments, "fine as a cobweb," that Nell's fingers fashioned. But all this could not go on for long. One day, when the triumvirate sat in "council close," Nell, suddenly lifting up the long black lashes, saw—nothing definable, but something that made her long to drown herself in the cold stream that ran hard by—something that blanched her face white as the lace she wove, and that thrilled her heart with a bitter pang.

"Is Mr. Mayne ever coming back to Darrell, Bee?" she asked, after a minute or so, as steadily as she could.

Bee understood it all. She knew that Nell had caught the look in Standish's face that was only meant for her to see. The sparkling light died out of her own countenance, and a furtive glance went towards Frank, as she answered low, but audibly—

"Yes, Nell, he comes to-morrow; and then I shall have to say good-bye for ever to all these pleasant meetings."

And in spite of herself her lips quivered visibly, and great drops sprang into her eyes.

Standish jumped up hastily, and bent tenderly over her. All recollection of Nell, and of her love and merits, was blotted out of his memory by the wild anguish that possessed him. What had she said? "Good-bye for ever." God! had that come already? He felt as if he *must* speak, even with that pale witness, in whose countenance he could read the lines of pain he had caused, listening to his frantic words. He thought he could not stem the torrent of pleading for a little more life, a little more grace, that seemed to be burning for utterance. Then a choking ball rose up in his throat; a heavy weight seemed to grow

upon his heart ; and he silently turned away and left the spot.

Nell, stooping to gather up her work, hid her hot tears, and murmuring that it was time to return homewards, rose also. But Bee, impetuous and impulsive, flung her arms round the girl's neck, and sobbed out great vehement sobs.

"Can you ever forgive me, Nell?" she whispered, very piteously.

"Yes, and him too," was the reply. And then Nell, breaking down completely, walked away to the house, which had looked so bright and peaceful but a few short hours before, but which now presented the aspect of a tomb for her buried hope and bliss.

Down upon the hearth she crouched, with two tiny hands covering her flushed face, weeping over her lost happiness, and dead to the outer world. Then a pair of great strong arms bent down to her recumbent form, and drew it straight up, holding it close—close.

And Frank, stooping over the mourner's head, touched it lightly with a caress.

She drew herself right away from his clasp : then she glanced towards him furtively. There stood the tall figure ; there were the dark honest eyes, the sweet smile that had won her heart ; and she went to him, and quietly, without one word, laid her shining tresses humbly down upon his shoulder, like a grieved penitent child.

"Nell, my darling !" And his voice was husky, and shook with emotion, as he remembered the great and intense love he was on the point of sacrificing for ever to a sense of honour, and to a great pity for this little girl, who he knew worshipped him so utterly.



"Let us forget all but our own true selves, and let us go back to the dear old days when nothing had come between us. Forgive the pain I have given you, and take me back to your heart once more!"

He need not have pleaded so; for Nell found no difficulty in replacing him in the heart from which he had never been dismissed. All she did was to throw her arms round his neck, and seal his pardon freely and fully. And Standish, *wanting* peace and rest, and some one who could soothe and not madden him as *she* did, fancied himself unutterably content.

Meanwhile Bee, after a baptism of tears, breathed out her penitence on a couch at Darrell.

"I will strive to be better than I am," she murmured to herself plaintively. "I will try to be faithful to friendship; but it will be very, *very* hard. Is love only to be a curse to me? It would be well if no one ever loved me; yet——"

And the violet eyes, that had been lazily watching an expiring ember in the grate, half closed; and she nestled her face more closely into the downy cushions, as if to hide the blushes it *should* have worn at her confession.

"It is my nature to try and make men care for me; and when I have succeeded, I hate and scorn them for being such fools!"

But she was deceiving herself, for there was no hate or scorn in her breast for Standish; and she never uttered passionately and hopelessly now, as she had once been wont to do, "Happiness and love are not for me!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE year had waned. The dreaded Anthesterion, when his wedding was to be, drew near, and Frank's heart sank lower and lower.

He had only seen Bec Darrell at church, but it had been enough. That one sight of her had utterly aneantised the patient work of weeks. Looking upon her sparkling face, with its passionate eyes and vivid lips, he was fain forced to confess within himself that none lived on earth who could dislodge the glowing image from his heart. Strive as he would, he knew that without her his life would ever be incomplete, that wanting her, craving for her, his soul would never be satisfied. Alas for Nell! it was an evil star that had beamed on the fatal meeting between her lover and her friend.

Vainly Frank tried to believe that he was as good as married in Heaven's eyes, and wrestled bravely with the new love that appeared to him in the light of a heinous sin. Uselessly he essayed to limit his thoughts to his affianced wife. All he could do was to be doubly gentle and kind to the girl he wronged so deeply within. He resolved never to risk an interview with Bee; but he could not give up the hope of *seeing* her stealthily, as the thief hovers round the glittering jewel he would possess, but durst not approach. The very air that passed him by when Bee was nigh had unutterable fascination in it, and the days that passed without a glimpse of her in the far distance were noted down as utter blanks in the calendar of his existence.

Then fate ordained a meeting when a dark and gloomy sky hung overhead, and a faint fragrance of pines came, borne on the breeze that swept in wild gusts over the steep hillsides. Standish was fearfully changed during the last weary trying months; his figure had grown slighter, and he looked very wan and haggard, as Bee suddenly came face to face with him.

Touched by his appearance, her manner was far softer than it usually was, as, without a word of greeting, she put her hand into his, and looked at him anxiously, though a little shyly.

Frank stood before her, motionless, tongue-tied, only his eyes telling her all that was in his heart. Womanlike, it was Bee who regained her self-possession first, and who contrived to break the silence that had fallen upon them; but unlike the ordinary diplomacy displayed by her sex, her opening remark was an ill-advised one, probing the wound in his life so keenly, that in very anguish he cried out to the sole physician who could cure him.

"Are you ill or unhappy, Mr. Standish?" she asked him, with an earnest solicitude in her manner and voice that sent his blood tingling through his veins. "What ails you?" and she clasped her hands in entreaty, while her eyes scanned his pallid features with an irrepressible yearning in their tender depths.

Days, weeks, nay, even months, had gone by since these two had been together, or spoken together. What wonder that Standish was unmanned.

"What ails me?" Frank almost gasped; and then he gave a short bitter laugh that struck strangely on her. "Do you not know what mortal ailment is sapping my life's whole happiness, nay, my life itself?

Then *I* will tell you." And he bent forwards, and seized her hands feverishly, while his eyes seemed to flash almost fiercely into hers.

She could have cried out with the pain his hold gave her, but she bit her under-lip hard. It appeared to her so paltry a thing, the physical hurt she suffered, in comparison with the evident mental suffering that he was going through.

"It is love for you, Miss Darrell, that is killing me, sending me to my grave, slowly, perhaps, but surely. No, don't tell me that I am mad! I know it. I have no right even to *feel* love for such as you. To dream that *you* could ever love *me* would be an unpardonable frenzy, which would but evoke your bitter contempt. I should never have *spoken* thus; I should never have *dared*, Miss Darrell, to insult you by this avowal; but I cannot help it—I cannot help it! Your sudden presence has unmanned me, bereft me of self-control, and left me nothing but a miserable pitiful fool!" and he let go her hands and turned away, shaking in every limb.

She could not help seeing the strong muscular frame quiver, as he tried hard to hide his emotion from her. So she stole noiselessly round him, and looked up with a soft angel pity into his poor white face.

They were in the shade of a large leafless trunk, alone. She, whom he worshipped dearer than his life, was within his reach. Conscience was nothing to him when her beauty of sunlit hair and gleaming eyes was near. His hands grew cold as death, his temples burned as with a thousand fires, and stooping down, he gathered her to him and kissed her madly, but nervously; and all the while, even through the



delirium of his brain, a great wonder filled his soul that those lips had been yielded to him : Bee never rebuked him !

It would have been difficult to recognise Frank's low and languid tones of the last few months in the fervid accents that breathed into Bee's ear all his mighty happiness, all his infinite hope. And Bee hearkened to all he said with a brilliant colour mantling over brow and upon the fair round cheek, that rested very close to Standish's breast, but with big, startled eyes. Marriage ! marriage with Standish, whom she knew to be a poor man, was an astounding event that she had never dreamt of in her philosophy ; but just after the kiss he had left on her lips, she dared not speak her thoughts. It was very sweet to her to stand there with a strong arm encircling her waist, and with a soft voice murmuring eternal love and faith, and she felt she lacked the courage to break the charm. So she let him murmur on until the name of " Nell " dissolved the magic spell.

" Frank !" she said, naturally enough, for she had often called him thus to herself ; but her voice uttering his Christian name sent the crimson blood leaping into his face, and as he held her in a close embrace, he began to realise that it was no beautiful but capricious beauty, such as the world knew Bee Darrell to be, whom he clasped, but a lovely loving woman, all his own to the very core.

" We have been dreadfully wicked ! I can never face Nell again—and you cannot, *dare* not tell her of all this ! You *must* marry her. You *must* forget me, Frank," she said, imperiously and passionately.

" Never, so help me Heaven !—not even in death ! Oh, if you leave me now, my love, my love ! now that

I have held you thus, and kissed you thus!" and he strained her to him, pouring down kisses on her brow, and cheeks, and lips, and even on the two little hands he grasped—"it will kill me, Bee! You have seen the change in me since last we met. Cannot you believe that parting from you now would be my death-warrant, that I could not survive such a delaceration of every feeling I possess—that without you I *cannot* live?"

And as he questioned her, her gaze wandered eagerly and pityingly over him, and it seemed to her that his words were in truth possible—that she alone could give him life.

"Will you be my wife soon, Bee?" he asked her after a silence, in which, without assurances in language that she would not give him up, he had learnt that he was very dear to her.

She started, and turned ashy pale. Was this to be the end of all her grand ambition, her sighs after wealth? The wealth which would be hers as mistress of Mayne Towers? Was she capable of sacrificing herself, and far more than herself—Darrell? Already, in the first vehemence of Standish's asseverations, in the first phantasy of her own feelings, she seemed to see the ruin of her beloved home. In the mellow leaves that the wintry blast had swept whirring into the dell and glades, where they lay dead and decaying fast, she read a symbol of the ancient walls crumbling into dust, and Darrell's oaks and elms levelled with the earth. For a moment she wavered, and Frank, with fast-beating heart, watched the indecision on her mobile face; then the mournful picture her imagination had conjured up faded right out of view; she felt that she loved Frank, and that that love was

infinitely more precious to her than lands, or silver, or gold.

So once more she put her hand into his, and softly lifted up her eyes towards him. It was a mute but all-sufficient acquiescence to his question.

CHAPTER VII.

NELL DACRES' work had fallen unconsciously into her lap, as with loosely clasped hands, and in a listless attitude, she sat with an unwonted expression of sadness written upon her face.

Black clouds were rapidly chasing one another up in the wintry sky, or gathering in opaque sullen masses as though in solemn conclave here and there, and Boreas shook with no gentle hand the windows of the parsonage house. There was no single glint of green visible, but leafless trees and shrubs, and the tall grass lay wrapped together beneath a broad white winding-sheet. Nell's thoughts were not of the gloomy weather; for what mattered externals to her when she could find no sunshine *within*? The black clouds hanging ominously above were not so dark as the shadows of fear and mistrust that trailed their forms over her heart and loomed up before her mind. She had many grave causes for her unhappiness, and the erewhile sanguine and placid nature had lost all its quiet content, and the faith that had been implicit as a child's was deserting her rapidly now.

Though quiet and even a little undemonstrative of late, her loving eye had not failed to note the change in her betrothed during the latter days; and though her lips had ventured on no anxious word, as she

watched the pallor, like the gray ashen hue of death, that crept now and then over his features, and the look of fragility that had replaced the strong athletic aspect of the bygone time, yet her heart felt nigh to breaking all the while. She had tried so hard, *so* hard to persuade herself that her lover's affections had only wandered from her temporarily; that his passion for Queen Bee had been but an ephemera; and that, removed from the dazzling glitter of her beauty, his soul would return to its old and legitimate allegiance, shaking off the trammels of bondage into which it had fallen. But it would not do—true love's instinct revealed to her at length that it was no passing enthrallment after all, and that though he might yet belong to her, his heart, the one jewel she desired, lay bleeding at Bee Darrell's feet.

Frank had told her only a few hours before of his meeting with Bee, but he had said nothing more. His nature was true and open as the day, and he would never have descended to deceive; but his defection made him feel so cowardly, for Nell's sake as well as for his own, that he had been forced to keep the whole truth from her for a while. Not that he was wavering now—his love completely overmastered both reason and principle; everything in his life hitherto seemed to have been unsubstantial and worthless, now that he had awoke to such an intensity of passion and longing, with Bee's bewildering face looking at him through all his sleeping and waking dreams. He felt entirely prostrate, as it were, under the wild fever that burnt in his veins—falling into broken snatches of rest—through which she lived and reigned, and having but one firm purpose in his breast—to satisfy his heart, no matter what betided! He seemed to see her hours afterwards lifting up her tender liquid eyes to his, and



placing her little hand within his own in dumb but eloquent acknowledgment of the feelings she bore him ; and after months of inexpressible pain and bitter regret that one little winter hour returned in all the vividness of its first passion and delight, to probe afresh and deeply the unclosed wound that lay festering in Standish's life.

The chill bleak winds, the wrathful lowering heavens, the moaning trees—he had felt and seen none of these ; he had only known that he was with her, that for the first time his lips had sought her own.

* * * *

Nell was sitting by the window still. She had sat there throughout the long afternoon, communing with herself and oblivious of time, and now the night had closed in wild and wet ; and as she listened to the heavy rain and the howling blast, she fell to wondering whether the elements were not weeping with her over the days that would come no more. She never even heard in her miserable reverie the footstep that she had learnt to look upon as a harbinger of happiness, and she started when a hand touched her shoulder gently, and through the evening gloom she saw Standish's tall figure standing close by.

"Frank," she said, almost inaudibly. Standish shivered a little as she spoke. He could not see her plainly, but he heard the tears in her voice, and he knew that her face must be white and tear-stained. "I am glad you have come to-night ; I want to speak to you."

Poor child, she was trying to speak firmly and quietly ; but she could have thrown herself at his feet, and have begged him to be merciful, to spare her such grievous sorrow, to pause ere he sacrificed the whole of her young life for the sake of a glittering phantom ;

and Standish, in spite of his all-absorbing attachment, longed to soothe her, like a loving brother. He knew quite well now that she was going to give him his freedom; but there was none of the lightsome spirit of a released prisoner about him, as he stood, like a criminal at the bar, awaiting the verdict from the mouth of that gentle judge.

Then Nell, to give herself courage, slid one ice-cold hand into his, and with the other she tried to hide the big tears that fell. "Frank, you have seen Bee to-day, and you have told her that you love her! Nay, let me speak," she whispered pleadingly, in a husky voice, as he tried to break in with a deprecatory word.

"I do not blame you if you did, Frank; for the love you feel for Bee is stronger than yourself, and *must* have been spoken some day. Perhaps it is better now than later, dear." And in the shimmering dusk he could just see the ghost of a mournful smile flit over her lips—an unselfish smile, forced upon her face from a desire to give him a little strength and nerve, and to show that she was not quite hopeless—though all the while she would gladly have closed her eyes and laid down in her shroud, with the wintry winds shrieking their wild requiem over her. "Later," she resumed after a momentary pause, in which she essayed to gather up a fresh store of courage, "when you were *my* husband, and the avowal would have been a crime in the sight of God, Frank!"

"Never," he interrupted her, hastily. "As your husband, no woman would have had a word of love from me, Nell. What! because I have been weak and fickle, do you deem me devoid of all honour and faith?" She never thought of resenting the tone of indignation that rang through his voice; she only fell to musing

for a minute or so on what might have been if his words were really true. If fate had united them long ago, all this misery might have been spared her; but such thoughts were useless now.

She glanced towards him; he did not look like a happy and triumphant wooer. Had his love met with a cold repulse from the proud Darrell blood, that would scorn to mate with one boasting of neither titled lineage or wealth?

She knew of Bee's half-pledged troth to the owner of majestic Mayne Towers—of her longings after money and power. And she feared, yes, *feared*, that this man's heart, to gain which would have been earth's crowning bliss to her, had been thrust back upon himself, not only in anger, but perhaps in contumely. She could try to bear her own burden bravely, praying Heaven to grant her strength and submission; but *his* unhappiness was a sight she could not look upon.

"And when Bee knew you loved her, what did she say?" she asked him, trembling, dreading to hear from his lips a confession of his soul's agony.

"Nell, you will not blame her, you will not drive her from your affection, when I tell you all that passed between us? You look, sitting here in the darkness, like a white saint, and I a weak mortal, craving your intercession with heaven for my sins. Let me kneel here, Nell"—and he threw himself down on his knees by her side—"that I may believe myself in a real confessional, and speak all that is in my breast.

"Bee came upon me like a fate, and from the first moment I looked upon her, I lost my head, my heart. I wrestled with myself, I strove to conquer, I tried to think only of you and your angel beauty and sweetness; but the spell of another was over me always,

through all, through all ! Then we met, and maddened by the sight of her face, carried away by the knowledge that nothing but the distant clouds and sighing winds were witness, I told her *how* I loved her, and—forgive her, Nell, forgive us both !—Bee said that she loved me in return, and promised to become my wife !”

“ God bless both you and her !” fell faint and fluttering upon Frank’s ear ; and he felt two clasped hands rest lightly on his head, like the touch of an angel’s wing.

The next moment Nell had glided away in the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Darrells of Darrell Court, who dated their pedigree by centuries, and whose proudest vaunting was the *sangre azul* that flowed through their veins, were not likely to approve of a poor and struggling student as a suitor for their only child.

To implore their sanction to her engagement with Standish, Bee knew to be sheer insanity—an ignition of a match to the sleeping fire of their pride and exclusiveness, in which not only her happiness but her freedom would be immolated ; and freedom was a privilege that Bee dearly prized, and could not have dispensed with. To have her actions supervised and her movements controlled, would have been misery to her high spirit and independent nature. So she sapiently kept her secret safely locked within her own breast, and forgetting that clandestine love was scarcely *digne* a descendant of the noble ancestors whose portraits hung in the damp old picture-gallery that, by reason of its

woful dilapidation, had been debarred to "sight-seers," her trysting-place with Frank was not within the sacred precincts of home, but within some flowery copse or woodland dell. She had but one excuse for her conduct: pride was forgotten in love—by far the holier passion of the two.

Meanwhile Cyril Mayne was often a guest at Darrell Court; not encouraged, perhaps, but not dismissed from Bee's presence as he should have been, now that fealty to Standish demanded an exclusion of all rivals.

The proprietor of Mayne Towers was a man who had long lived in the world and for the world; women hitherto had been playthings to charm away an idle hour, and depth of feeling in them was a sentiment that would have not only wearied but puzzled him. But Bee was so essentially cold, so stonelike, that he fretted his spirit continually against her utter hardness, and in the piquant friction believed that he loved her deeply; but in truth she pleased his eye, and his fancy was not so deep-seated as he imagined.

Stinging sarcasms from her ruby lips sounded pleasanter to his enamoured ears than wreathed flatteries on other tongues. And from sheer opposition, he vowed to win her hand, if not her heart; but even that he did not despair of gaining; for the heart of a woman was never an impregnable fortress to his ideas, and like a beleaguered citadel might be made to yield at length.

After all, Standish was not really happy. Something seemed to stand at times between him and his love—an invisible sort of wall, which he was helpless to dash away. He was a sensitive man, and the very sense of her long lineage wounded him; he felt that with that great barrier of Darrell dignity and haughtiness inter-

vening, real confidence and unreserved affection could scarcely be his; and yet not for anything could he have given her up. He knew that if she left him there would be nothing more on earth to live for.

And many an hour that found him lurking like a poacher amongst the trees for a glimpse of her, she was sunning her beauty on the terrace with Cyril by her side, turning no deaf ear as he expatiated with natural pride on the glories of Mayne Towers. These descriptions filled her mind unconsciously to herself, and aroused in her soul afresh an adulation of wealth that in the first days of her engagement to Frank had completely slumbered; and when, after listening to them, she would steal away to the man she had promised to marry, he would find her shrink away from his touch, and her mouth grow cold beneath his pressure. And yet all the while her lips would affirm that she loved him with an earnestness that could not fail to satisfy him.

Her cheek had lost a great deal of its brilliant colouring, and her spirits were painfully fitful. One day when they met, Frank, after anxiously watching her, felt a heavy foreboding come over him.

"Tell me, Bee, has anything or anybody come between you and me?" he asked, nervously, fixing a keen look upon her.

She turned away from him with a deep scarlet flush overspreading her features, gave a forced laugh, then burst into tears.

He was shocked, cut to the heart. It was the first time he had seen tears in those bright beautiful eyes, and the sight was torture to him.

"What is it?" he questioned frantically; and his

heart seemed to stand still for a moment, then it beat fast to suffocation.

"For God's sake, Bee, tell me what all this means!"

"Nothing." And she hastily wiped her tears; then, pushing his hair caressingly off his forehead, she rose on tiptoe and kissed it tenderly. "What *could* come between us now?" she murmured softly; "now, when I know that I love you only in 'the wide, wide world?' And you, Frank, you will never cease to care for me, not even if death takes me away from you, will you?" And she shivered in his arms and nestled close to him, as she thought that it would indeed be a "death in life" that took her from him.

He looked down upon the girl clinging to his breast, while his white lips whispered slowly—

"Bee, do you want to break my heart?"

Her mood suddenly changed; the colour flew back to her cheeks; the light of a hundred sapphires flashed from her eyes.

"It's all folly, Frank," she answered lightly. "Papa's sad face over his accounts has worried me. We are paupers at the Court, you know. And somehow the old woods looked unusually dull and gloomy as I came along. I am longing for change, Frank; shall we go to Paris when we are married?"

"It requires a weightier purse than mine, Bee, for Paris; I am afraid you will have to content yourself with the ivy-clad cottage that is not far from this. But with so much love, darling, we shall want nothing else, shall we?"

She shook her head; it might have been in assent or dissent, he could not guess which; but the mention of the tiny cottage, bright and pretty as it was, had evidently not tended to enliven her, for she grew pale

and weary-looking as they parted. After she had gone a few steps, she walked back to him.

"Frank, you will remember your promise to me? You will never cease to care for me, whatever happens?" she asked him, very gravely.

Standish gazed at her in unfeigned surprise; but he knew that she was wont to be capricious in her moods, so he only said—

"No matter what happens, nothing could take away my love from you; I shall love you till I die."

She seemed satisfied as he spoke, and, throwing her arms round him, she drew down his face, and thanked him for his promise on his lips.

CHAPTER IX.

"READ it again, Nell!" and obedient to the voice whose slightest tone yet possessed the power to thrill her frame, Nell Dacres, kneeling by Standish's death-bed, took from his trembling hand a crumpled, blotted, tear-stained letter, whose resting-place, night and day, was upon his breast.

"FRANK,—My heart is breaking, my brain is wild! It seems to me as if heaven had slipped from my grasp, that hell will be my future home!

"When you get this, I shall be another man's wife; you and I shall be parted for ever! Oh, Frank, a thousand devils seem to be shrieking into my ears the knell of our eternal parting. I never felt how utterly my heart was yours till now; and yet I have, by my own will, placed an impassable gulf between us. I have sold myself to save Darrell. I could not have

seen it in alien hands and have lived. So I ask you, on my knees, not to despise me, but to pity me; nay, to care for me still.

“Good-bye, Frank; remember your promise—‘No matter what happens, *nothing* could take away my love from you; I shall love you till I die!’”

“My darling! my darling!” the dying man said faintly. “Nell, you will tell her how faithfully I kept my promise!” And Nell, bending her head down upon the bed, tried hard to smother her sobs.

That letter had reached Standish four months before, and he never rallied from the shock. The glorious summer had returned, and beneath the genial sunshine the green leaves whispered, the flowers bloomed, and birds sang blithely; but for Standish, the “trail of the serpent” was over them all. Lonely and desolate, his life drifted slowly away in the little ivy-clad cottage where she was to have lived. Then, when too weak to rise, it was Nell Dacres who, like a ministering angel, hovered over his pillow, tending him carefully, breathing to him words of comfort and peace. Unselfish to the last, she only thought of him; she had but one desire, one hope—to smooth his path to that heaven where they two might meet again. Day after day she knelt beside him, murmuring sweet and solemn truths to him whose soul was already on the wing to eternity; and while she strove to pray with steady accents, her pallid lips quivered, and she knew that the grave in which they laid him would hold her broken heart as well.

What a mockery the world seemed to her now! Outside, light and colouring and melody; inside, darkness, the pallor of fleeting life, the one refrain on the rigid lips—“I shall never cease to love you till I die!”

Over and over again those words vibrated sadly upon the watcher's breast ; there was such a depth of pathos in them, such an infinity of pain ! Then one day a voice so changed, so faint, fell on her ear, that Nell, trembling all over, with blanched face and quickened breath bent hastily over him.

" Bee, my Bee !" it said ; " oh, tell her that I never forgot her, not even in death ! Give me the letter, Nell ! here ! here ! close to me !" and with a momentary strength he strove to press it to his heart, while a tender smile irradiated his features, and made his white face godlike in its beauty. Then his hands fell nervelessly down, and Nell Dacres and " Death " were alone together, with the summer sunshine playing upon both, and the birds singing a *jubilate* for the soul that had gone to eternal rest.





FIORELLA: A WAIF.

PART I.



HE following description would indeed be a quaint opening for an idyl, and if a romance was on the point of being narrated, a more prepossessing theatre for the scene of the drama would assuredly have been selected; but no invention is in contemplation, and to this simple story truth alone can in anywise impart interest.

The glory of Paris has departed greatly, and it is no longer the beautiful and charming city, the famous *paradis des femmes*, that it was before the terrible Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71; but the meaner suburbs and streets of the ex-queen of capitals, offering but small temptation for German depredation, have not probably altered to any very material extent the aspect they presented full many a year ago.

Therefore if your footsteps should ever lead you, my reader, through the Rue Bon Enfant, which is situated in close contiguity to the well-known Batignolles, your gaze may yet fall perchance on a door marked 23 in large and clumsy numbers.

This door, notwithstanding certain dauby relays of bright brown paint and varnish, offered a shabby ap-

pearance enough, although it stood for the principal portal.

It led to a lengthy slip of a garden, if by such a name could be designated ground dry and sterile as a common yard, and which was enclosed by a wall, the stonework of which was broken and dirty with age and weather combined. Some half a dozen trees, black-trunked, leafless, and stunted in their growth, a narrow weed-bedecked pathway, and rusty borders of jagged box, surrounding patches of uncultivated earth, were the sole adornments of this most uninviting parterre.

At the farthest extremity a small house stood, in such a dilapidated condition that it appeared solely to retain its equilibrium by being propped up, as it were, by a tall wall, on the summit of which the August sun poured down its effulgence with true tropical fervour.

The habitation bore upon it even a more dismal impress than its grounds. It was composed of only one story, that contained three barely-furnished rooms. Before the window—panes of which were cracked and paper-patched—were placed a rough deal table and chair, worm-eaten and rotten from the effects of alternate sun and rain.

Some ten years ago Clement L'Estrange, attached to the British Embassy in Paris, sought the direction of the Batignolles for the purpose of delivering personally a letter containing a cheque for a large amount, with the safe conduct of which he had been intrusted by an intimate friend and fellow diplomat. The missive was addressed to a person whose antecedents corresponded with the questionable locality of her dwelling.

L'Estrange, habituated only to the most elegant and refined quarters of Paris, found himself in some-



what of a dilemma on descending from the uncomfortable conveyance, a cross between an omnibus and a *char-à-bancs*, that plied between the city and the suburbs *pro bono publico*. The miserable and dingy faubourg was an unknown world to him, and appeared in the light of a straggling provincial town, filled with narrow streets and squalid houses.

After walking hither and thither a few paces in an aimless and undecided way, he paused to consider whether the Rue des Dames, or the Rue Jaques, both of which lay on the right-hand side, would be the best and straightest route to his destination, as they were apparently the chief thoroughfares of the place.

His indecision was, however, short-lived, and without any premeditation he turned down the Rue Bon Enfant, that was on his left. It seemed almost as if fate impelled him thitherwards; for sometimes in this life the paltriest trifle leads to the gravest epochs of existence. If L'Estrange had pursued any other street but the one he took, he would in all likelihood have arrived in due time at the place he was in quest of, and having handed over the document, he would have retaken the road to Paris, without an adventure of any sort; but the turn to the left led to a meeting that was to exercise an influence over the whole of his future life.

The Rue Bon Enfant is a silent, almost a deserted, street, conducting at one end into large fields, if the clayey masses that surround the Parisian faubourgs can be explained by the word "field."

Arriving at a few yards from No. 23, L'Estrange saw the shabby old-fashioned door open suddenly, and a young girl issue from it. She stood for a moment conversing with an old beldame in the garb of a

peasant, whose angular proportions and sour countenance augured ill for peace ; then she slowly walked on, and, impressed with her *tournure*, Clement followed in the same direction, and reached in due course a square piece of ground, on which rustic benches were placed at intervals.

The girl threw herself wearily down on one of the seats, and closed her eyes ; while Clement, stealing noiselessly behind her, strove to examine her appearance.

Not more than sixteen summers could have rolled over her head. She was *petite* in proportions, but slim rather than thin ; her features were small and exquisitely moulded, and she had cheeks and lips that looked like roses kissed into bloom by the southern sun ; while the blue-black hair, that flashed bright and lustrous, floated in heavy masses down below her slender waist.

The extreme inconsistency of her attire alone could not have failed to strike the most casual of observers ; the extraordinary *mélange* of elegance and bad taste that pervaded her whole toilette was eccentricity itself. A round straw hat, fantastically trimmed, lay tossed upon the ground, with a pair of homely thread gloves, mended at the thumbs, by its side. A violet silk bodice, spangled and embroidered in dingy gold, surmounted full skirts of green, looped here and there by bunches of velvet. Her tiny feet were encased in awkward rough boots, and slung across her breast by a broad ribbon was a little old worn guitar. Suddenly she opened her eyes, and L'Estrange saw that they were large, and dark, and almond-shaped. A sad smile flitted over her fresh red lips as, bending down, she pressed a fervent kiss upon the instrument ; and



raising herself languidly from her reclining position, she struck a few plaintive chords, and began to sing.

“ Ah, quel funereo canto
Sul core amor mi piomba,
Che madre e genitrice
Scorse con me alla tomba,
Or esule e deserta,
Lunge dal patrio suolo,
Non è, non è, più quella
La povera Fiorella.

“ Forse avrò gli astri amici
Tetto sarammi il cielo
Coperto ora di squallido
Or di ridente velo.
E il sol porgerà dolce
Vital calore al fianco ;
Ma non sarà più quella
La povera Fiorella.

“ I Gorgheggiante Angelli
Coll' alternante suono
Saran dolce diletto
Dopo il baleno e il suono,
Ombra mi darà il bosco,
Avrà di me il ciel cura ;
Ma non sarà più quella
La povera Fiorella.”

The mournful ditty ceased, with a deep sigh for its refrain ; and raising the heavy lashes that had rested on her cheek, she discovered the proximity of L'Es-trange. There was something in her glance that acted like a magnet to him ; and involuntarily he advanced closer to her, while she hung down her head shyly, and blushed deeply over face and neck. In sooth there had been no encouragement in her eyes—only astonishment and embarrassment at finding an audience to her *al fresco* melody ; but still her look

had not repelled, so he gathered up courage and spoke, holding the letter in his hand as an apology for addressing her.

"Pardon, mademoiselle, but in which direction lies the Rue St. Jean?" he asked in his gentlest and most suave tones, concentrating into his short phrase all the courtliness of which he was master; but he quite failed in impressing the girl with a sense of high-bred dignity; for the sorrowful expression that had hitherto characterized her features was replaced by a half-laugh; and then she bit her lips hard, either to preserve decorum, or else to show a serious demeanour before her handsome interlocutor.

"Straight on, monsieur, and turn to the right," she replied in imperfect French; and then, by a slight but haughty bend of her dainty head, she indicated as clearly as any *grande dame* could have done, her desire to be alone; but L'Estrange lingered still, very loth to quit the charmed spot. Her face, with its luminous eyes and rich tints, seemed to have cast a spell upon him, and he could not move a step.

"Mademoiselle," he pleaded, after a short silence, during which she sat clasping her guitar close, and now and then stroking it fondly, as if it had been a living thing, "sing that song once again, that your voice may live with me in my dreams, even if we chance never to meet again!"

She glanced up at him hastily, to mark if he was laughing at her or mocking her; but her eyes fell as she read the unfeigned admiration with which he was regarding her. The next moment big tears coursed one another rapidly down her cheeks, but she dashed them quickly away.

"Does monsieur love music as I do? It is all that

makes life pleasant to me. O, mon enfant, mon trésor!" she whispered softly to the guitar, "what should I do without you, alone, alone in the world!"

L'Estrange felt a strange mist come over his eyes as he listened to the artless words betokening such utter desolation; but he was no Don Juan, and the strong compassion she had so evoked in his heart warned him to leave her as speedily as he could. He was at a loss for words to continue the conversation, as well-hackneyed compliments, such as he would have glibly uttered to some brilliant belle in a glittering saloon, appeared to him a desecration to the lonely child before him, with nought to shield her from wrong or harm but the heaven above her and the power of her own pure innocence.

"You are young to be so unhappy," he said, sympathizingly. "Sorrow comes with old age; but your days should be all sunshine, and your slumber as peaceful as that of the sleeping birds, poverina."

As the last word fell upon her ears she started up with flashing eyes and flushing face.

"Does monsieur speak my language, the language of my beloved south?" she asked him, eagerly.

Clement shook his head sadly in the negative; he was unfortunately no proficient in the Italian tongue, although he understood it well, and had caught some words in his short sojourn at Florence.

"Mademoiselle is Italian, then? May I ask why she has left her own country?" he questioned respectfully, but unable to suppress the keen curiosity that she had excited in his breast.

"Ah, why, indeed? Because I am alone, monsieur, and I have only one friend—there above!" and she pointed reverentially to the blue sky, and crossed

herself devoutly. "The sun is going down fast, and I must not stay here longer," she said, and with a low "Addio, signor," she rose from her seat.

L'Estrange bowed gravely, and walked away a few paces, then he turned for a last look. The girl was regarding his receding form intently, with a frank and half-regretful smile upon her fair face. He bowed again, and slowly went on his way.

"What is she, an angel or the reverse?" he soliloquized. "I wonder who she can be? The child of some common peasant, with a refinement of soul unnatural to her proper sphere, I suppose."

Alas, no! he was wrong; for she could boast of no such noble heritage as the good and honest blood and untarnished name of a rough peasant; she was only a poor little waif, thrown on the world from an ignoble stock; and she was one of the mysteries of creation, for seldom does a tree, rotten at the core, bear upon it blossoms that are fresh and pure. L'Estrange, following the injunctions he had received, reached the Rue St. Jean with facility, and into Madame le Blanc's own plump hand he delivered the letter he was in charge of.

It is essential to this tale to describe Madame le Blanc to a certain extent, although to do so properly would be somewhat of a difficult task. It has been hinted already that her past life would not bear strict investigation; and this simple fact alone would raise a prejudice against her, that any relation of the good qualities she possessed would scarcely disperse.

Free notions of living, although occasionally borne with, if the freethinkers are placed high in the social scale, are not usually allowed amongst the middling orders without receiving severe animadversion, and

Madame le Blanc was too ordinary a person to have had her peccadilloes leniently overlooked.

She was a woman of an uncertain age ; for in her youth she had been remarkable for her beauty, and the remains of it were yet visible. Educated at St. Denis, she had pretensions to ability, and there was in her composition a good deal of the cunning that is a trait peculiar to the lower classes. She had had a husband at some period of her life, although whether he was dead or living was a fact that was unknown to the most intimate of her friends.

Clement L'Estrange and she had been formally acquainted in bygone years ; and he met her now under circumstances that betokened a great falling-off in her finances. She had been the mistress of a bijou house in Paris, and she had had a handsome account at her banker's ; but like many Parisian belles, on the appearance of the first wrinkle on her cheeks, she had wisely abandoned the theatre of her triumphs, anxious to cross the barrier before the advent of the first grey hair amongst her wealth of tresses.

L'Estrange was young, handsome, and affluent ; and youth, beauty, and riches constitute a formidable *tria juncta in uno* all over the world. It was hardly a marvel, then, that his reception was a flattering one.

For awhile the conversation ran on their mutual friend, the writer of the letter ; and Madame le Blanc, whatever her inward opinions were on the subject of his merits or demerits, yet possessed the worldly wisdom to disguise her real sentiment under a mask of indifference.

"He was a good sort of man," she said, speaking of him as though death had deprived him of all right to figure in any tense of the verb but the past.

L'Estrange answered nothing. He was lost in a contemplation of his companion, whose sable plaits were coiled far too artistically upon her brow, and whose roses were too vivid to have been planted on her cheeks by Nature's hand. The sight recalled to him in pleasant contrast the fresh soft tints and luxuriant hair of the young Italian.

Madame le Blanc's manner was frank and encouraging; and Clement, unrestrained by any feeling of reserve, which was a discreet quality utterly foreign to his character, could not refrain from unburdening himself to so slight an acquaintance.

"Madame," he said, with a quaint assumption of friendliness, "I am on the eve of making a confidante of you, although, perhaps, it will be hardy of me to do so. During the last hour I have lost my heart."

"Really!" exclaimed his auditor, pulling a flower hastily from a neighbouring vase, and smiling demurely as she inhaled its fragrance. "But the avowal that is so unusually sudden must be caused by a love too strong and too vehement to endure concealment, so we will forgive it," she added, with a majestic vanity that was plainly perceptible. But L'Estrange, far too much occupied with another image, never noticed her manner or heeded the purport of her words, and began to dilate enthusiastically on the loveliness of the girl he had encountered on his way.

"I see," interrupted Madame le Blanc, in a scornful flippant tone, while an angry flush overspread her features, and an ugly sneer curled her upper lip; "you have met the little Fiorella. Many besides you have been fascinated by her; but it is useless. For reasons that I have no time now to explain, the child



is forbidden fruit. Fiorella is my protégée, monsieur ; so I have the right to say what I do."

A strange dizziness came over L'Estrange, as he listened to her words. Fiorella this woman's protégée ! What, then, could she be ? He shuddered as a thousand fancies and suspicions rushed across his brain.

" I do not deny any right you may claim, madame ; but if she is forbidden fruit, why, you must know that the pursuit which is most difficult of achievement is always the most inviting."

Madame le Blanc seemed to be reflecting ; for a minute or two silence reigned in the room. Then she spoke, with a wily smile on her mouth.

" However, I will not keep from Fiorella the gratification of knowing that she has made a conquest of such an aristocratic gentleman ;" and her accents were so wheedling that they disgusted their hearer. " Fiorella dines with me always, and she will be here presently."

L'Estrange rose from his seat, and walking up to the sofa, gently deposited his hat and cane ; then he slowly drew off his gloves, and said pleasantly—

" And I too will dine with you to-day, if you will permit me, madame."

She laughed, protesting against such an arrangement ; and then she launched into apologies for the dinner, which she averred was too bourgeois to suit a fastidious palate.

But Clement was not to be dismissed thus. He swept away all her scruples by a kiss upon her hand, and remained.

A whole hour passed slowly away in spasmodic efforts at conversation, for ever and anon his hostess left him to superintend the culinary department.

Every minute lagged sorely on its course, and that hour was the longest Clement had ever known. At the end of it the door opened, and Fiorella glided noiselessly in.

Madame le Blanc's apartment was dimly lighted by green venetian blinds, so that L'Estrange, who had risen from his chair, remained unnoticed for an instant. Then Fiorella's eyes fell upon him, and recognising him at once, she blushed up to her forehead, as she timidly returned his greeting. On Madame le Blanc's return, a startled wistful expression filled the girl's dark eyes, and her manner grew painfully nervous. None of her movements, that might have been imperceptible to indifferent spectators, escaped Clement's vigilant gaze. He treasured them all up in his memory, to be carefully dissected and properly interpreted at a later period. The meal progressed but stiffly, attended with the usual constraint that strangers feel when drawn suddenly into contact, and who are inwardly studying each other, while endeavouring to keep a mask over their own countenances.

Madame le Blanc was one of those hopelessly underbred women who consider it *de rigueur* to wear white kid-gloves at meal-times, and to allude frequently, in an indifferent sort of tone, to their carriages and cachemires. These were but tiny solecisms, perhaps, against the laws of good-breeding, but they revolted far more than much greater sins against the *convenances*.

Clement L'Estrange, accustomed, by right of birth and position, to daily association with the cream of society, found the little false notes jangle harshly on the tympanum of his most sensitive ear. Madame le Blanc's style brought home plainly the immensity of



social incompatibility that exists in large cities—incompatibilities that are much more felt than seen with regard to the different shades that divide into irreconcilable castes the society of Paris. L'Estrange, in spite of being an aristocrat to the backbone, was perhaps infinitely more tolerant than most men of his calibre.

He was one of those who visited everywhere, not only from habit, but from inclination ; and he lived an easy sort of existence, savouring of swell Bohemianism, amongst all classes, studying with interest the deficiencies that existed in each, and yet accommodating himself to all. For Clement, the ridiculous (and he discovered as much of that element amongst the highest as amongst the lowest) was more a subject for observation and amusement than disgust.

At this time, however, had he been president at a feast of red Indians, the peculiar habits and idiosyncrasies of the tribe would have failed in distracting his attention from Madame le Blanc's protégée.

He could scarcely remove his eyes from her face, while he strove to sustain a fragmentary conversation at the table. Fiorella had a novel and strange beauty that acted like a spell upon him. She was dressed still in her curious but picturesque costume of the noon, and her hands, marvellously white and delicate, had fingers tapering to nails that were tinted like sea-shells.

She appeared absent when spoken to, yet her gaze constantly scrutinized Clement's countenance, and she smiled slightly now and then. He addressed her frequently, gaining only a gentle monosyllable in reply ; but while she uttered it, her features lit up with the brightest intelligence. She was an enigma, yet

Clement felt himself drawn towards her by a strong sympathy.

Explain who will the cause of sudden likes and dislikes, there is no doubt that, in spite of reason, of sense, of observation, and even of conviction, our beings have in this world mysterious relations with other beings; and it is thus that some displease without reason, and that we often judge without knowledge. It was not purely the physical attraction of Fiorella that exercised so potent a charm over L'Estrange; to many tastes she would have been deemed more remarkable than beautiful.

It was not any especial grace, for her shyness rather detracted from that, and it could not have been her brilliancy, for she scarcely opened her mouth to speak. But Fiorella possessed for Clement, in the highest degree, that peculiarity that is composed of many things, that cannot be individualized, but which yet represents everything, and that no other charm can make up for—the quality of “attractiveness.” In the society of Madame le Blanc, L'Estrange found himself out of place. He was not of her sort, and he had no feelings in common with her, whereas the little unknown girl appeared to him like one of his own class, and notwithstanding her objectionable surroundings, looked like one of his own high race. He saw that Fiorella regarded him with interest.

To please is half-way to being in love oneself, for there is no flattery so sweet or so subtle as the consciousness of being appreciated. One towards whom we feel indifferent has it generally in his or her power, by an adroit ministration to our *amour propre*, or by an amiable coincidence in some pet theory, to turn us from severity into indulgence, or from coolness into



warmth, for human nature invariably softens towards softness.

In the organization of mortals, self-love must be placed in close proximity to the heart; for often the sensations are confounded, and we attribute to one feeling that which should be attributed to the other.

Clement, who at first sight had judged Fiorella to be a child of the people, ended by discovering in her reflective face and speaking eyes an inexhaustible source for drawing romantic fancies. The preoccupation she had displayed since her start on first beholding him was perplexing; but he determined to unravel the mystery she presented.

When the repast was over, the trio adjourned to the *salon*, and Fiorella, on pretext of finding a book, approached him.

"Can you explain why you have dined with Madame le Blanc, when your acquaintance with her is so slight?" she whispered, in low and hurried tones.

"Because," replied Clement, looking as though he wanted to read her very soul, "I wished to see *you* again, and to find out *what* you are!" and his voice sounded grave and stern, as a host of unpleasant suspicions again thronged into his mind.

The girl did not answer a word. She only looked up reproachfully, and sat down quietly, nay, almost humbly. L'Estrange saw large tears shining on her dark lashes, and his heart misgave him for the injustice he had done her.

"Mademoiselle," he said, in loud and formal accents, "will you not sing to us to-night? I see you have a guitar lying there."

She shrank back in dismay, and said imploringly—

"Do not ask me to sing, monsieur; I am not well to-day. I *cannot* sing before *her*," she added, half audibly, and she gave a slight wave of her hand towards Madame le Blanc, who stood a short distance from them. A little later Clement rose to take leave; and saying that an enclosure to him at any time would find the friend of whose letter he had been the bearer, he placed his card on the mantelshelf. He reached the door, but before it had quite closed upon him, he saw Fiorella seize the card, and study it intently.

PART II.

"I know a maiden fair to see;
Take care!
She can both false and friendly be;
Beware! beware!
Trust her not, she's fooling thee!"

murmured Clement L'Estrange, as he leant out of the window of his quiet little entresol, situated in a corner of the Rue Tronchet, that looked upon the beautiful church of the Madeleine and on the extensive flower-market that is held at its base.

"Truly her face is as fair as the fairest of Eve's daughters, but I warrant her soul does not correspond to it in purity and beauty; so drive her out of your head, if you can, Clement, in a big volume of smoke;" and, lighting an *havana*, he puffed away energetically for some time.

With the rosy daybeams streaming down full upon his light wavy hair and well-cut features, and deepening into violet the blue eyes that were shaded by long curling lashes, L'Estrange presented a very



attractive object to the passers-by, and many a woman's coy glance stole up towards him.

To be seen at a window in Paris is considered rather a grave infringement of *les convenances*. But Clement held decided opinions of his own, and as a rule was extremely independent as regarded censure; besides, he possessed a happy faculty for seizing on any pleasure or occupation without troubling himself as to what "Mrs. Grundy" would say.

To watch the different phases of "life" in the streets was a favourite *passe-temps* that he allowed himself to indulge in freely during the day, whenever he found an idle moment on his hands. He had, after a long residence in the Rue Tronchet, learnt to know the appearance and habits of most of his nearest neighbours to a curious extent, and it usually amused him to conjecture the social status of each individual; but now his eyes wore rather a vacant expression, and, in spite of himself, his memory continually reverted to Fiorella.

Ten days had rolled their course since his interview with Madame le Blanc; but the wondrously soft orbs and sweet face of the waif had haunted him perpetually. Even in his dreams, a form lithe and graceful, fantastically attired, with tear-drops glistening on pale cheeks, and long black hair floating on the wind, visited him, whilst low and plaintive melody rose upon his ear.

Fiorella appeared to him to be the strangest enigma in the world; for with all her manifold attractions and southern beauty there was yet a something almost weird and unearthly about her. L'Estrange felt assured that she had not really touched his heart; he plumed himself on being too much un

homme du monde to allow his affections to be carried by assault, more especially as he was habitually a little distrustful of the softer sex ; but the girl had succeeded in piquing his curiosity, and again and again he caught himself soliloquizing about her.

If Fiorella possessed the same character as Madame le Blanc, it was marvellous that her manners should be so dissimilar. Her bearing was so shy and reticent, her language so pure and modest ; and if she had remained good and true in thought and sentiment, notwithstanding the force of pernicious example and the deteriorating influences that in all likelihood existed around her, what a noble and interesting nature hers must be !

Thus L'Estrange ruminated over the possibilities of the case—occasionally leaning to one side and then to the other, until his brain began to whirl, and Fiorella flitted before his vision as alternate angel and fiend.

The whole episode of his visit to the Batignolles, a quarter from which no romantic adventure could have been anticipated, was perplexing and unsatisfactory ; and it irritated him beyond measure, that when a casual meeting of the kind was far from being an extraordinary occurrence in a man's life, that this particular *rencontre* should have the power to occupy him in spite of his desire to consign the matter to oblivion at once and for ever.

Paris, with a blue sky and with the genial sun of a May day shining down upon it, is a pleasant sight enough. The clear atmosphere, that is so rarely impregnated by the unhealthy fog and smoke that London may claim as its especial privileges, is marvellously exhilarating to the spirits of sojourners in the charming French capital : and as Clement's gaze rested on



the crowd of gay flower-sellers, with bright rosy faces and stiff snowy head-gear, laughing and chattering in groups, and the small *gamins* who kept high jubilee in the *Place*, his countenance relaxed in seriousness, and he became amused in the scene.

Of a sudden, however, he started visibly, with a hot flush suffusing his face, as he caught sight in the distance of the figure of a young girl. She walked along very slowly, and with a slight lingering in her step, and then she paused at a gaudy flower-stall; then Clement, watching intently, saw her purchase a little bouquet of peach blossoms, which she fastened carefully in her bosom.

He was eager to satisfy himself that it was indeed the subject of his musings who was within a few yards of him; and without a moment's hesitation he flung away the remnant of his choice cigar, together with all doubts and suspicions, to the four winds; and, seizing his hat, sprang quickly down the stairs, and out upon the *Place*, never stopping until he stood face to face with Fiorella.

Bashful and evidently trembling, red and pale by turns, she gave him no greeting save a shy glance from a pair of soft dark eyes: but the mute recognition spoke volumes, and Clement desired no greater eloquence.

Fiorella was habited in her eccentric garments of violet and green, but a long black mantle, fashioned somewhat like a domino, concealed the strangeness of her attire; while the broad-brimmed hat, with its bright-coloured ribbons, fell low over her brow, but did not hide the loveliness of her features or the redundancy of the glossy tresses that still hung over her shoulders unconfined by fillet or comb. In all the

eight-and-twenty years that L'Estrange had lived in the world, he never recollected experiencing such a feeling of embarrassment as that which seized him now. Vainly he essayed to break the silence that had fallen upon both. He seemed to have become suddenly tongue-tied.

It was the girl who spoke first, but in accents that shook and that came so faint that they were barely audible.

"Monsieur!" she said deprecatingly, and with a beseeching look, "you are doubtless surprised at seeing me here—you will blame me, perhaps; but I felt that I *must* speak to you again, so I came in the hope of meeting you."

L'Estrange answered nothing. Doubts were thronging fast and thick into his mind, and he felt sorry that she had come.

Then his eyes met hers, and there was such an infinity of innocence in their frank depths, such child-like candour on her brow and half-parted lips, that his scepticism melted away in a moment, and he felt like a coward for having wronged her.

The public thoroughfare was scarcely a fit place for an explanation; so he quietly directed her steps towards the Parc de Monceaux, that lay some little distance from the spot where they had met.

During the time that it took to arrive there, he strove to find an opening by which he could divine her reasons for seeking him. If for an instant vain visions of a "conquest" had entered his imagination, the idea had been dispelled completely by the extreme gravity and reserve of his companion's demeanour.

Fiorella's courage had apparently deserted her; for her mouth was firmly closed, and her cheeks wore a hue of the petals of a white rose.

Clement, pitying the painful timidity from which she was visibly suffering, determined to lead the way to conversation.

"I know, mademoiselle, why you desired to see me again," he said, in a tone that sounded abrupt and awkward to his own ears; and he felt annoyed at his failure in *finesse*—an art of which he had believed himself master. "You fancied that my manner had changed to you when we met at Madame le Blanc's; that I was grave, nay, even a little severe to you, perhaps. In fact, you thought that the *entourage* in which I found you had prejudiced me slightly, and you did not care that any one should think badly of you. Is it not for this reason that you wish to explain to me how you came to be under Madame le Blanc's protection?"

There was a momentary silence again, during which Clement congratulated himself inwardly on having recovered his usual powers of diplomacy. He thought that the wiliness of his speech could not fail to evoke an answer by which his curiosity would at once be satisfied. And he was right in his surmise.

"Ah, monsieur," she replied, looking him full in the face with great humid eyes, in which there was no shadow of guile, and with a sad quiver in the corner of her scarlet mouth, "did I not tell you that I was all alone in the world, with no one to care for me while I live, and no one to mourn for me if I die? I was stolen away by a gipsy when I was very young—so young that I have no remembrance of my parents, although I have tried hard, *hard* to picture to myself a mother's loving face; but a mist hangs over my past that memory cannot penetrate. The only thing that ever really loved me was a dog; but"

—and she shuddered—“ they killed it before my eyes, because I stole food for it when it was starving. Oh, monsieur, it was only a poor dumb animal; but it liked me to fondle it, it crept close to me when it was cold; and I shall never forget the piteous look it gave me as it died. I never had a kindly word till *you* spoke to me, and looked at me as if at any rate I was a human being. Three years ago the gipsy woman with whom I lived, and who brought me to France, disappeared from our hovel in the Batignolles, and I was left quite alone, without a sou to buy bread, or a roof to shelter me. Then Madame le Blanc, hearing of my forlorn state, took compassion upon me, and placed me in the charge of the femme Moret. O, she is so cruel to me, monsieur. I try with all my might to be grateful to Madame le Blanc for having saved me from starvation; but I often think that death would be far preferable to such a life.”

And she clasped her two little hands over her face to hide her emotion.

“ Poor child! poor Fiorella!” murmured L’Estrange softly, deeply moved as he regarded her.

They had walked to and fro in the sunshine until the shades of evening had begun to fall, and even a star or two peeped down from its height inquisitively on the pair.

Clement watched the dying light playing upon her lustrous hair. She never looked up at him; but her fingers nervously scattered the flowers that she had fastened into her bodice, and they fell to the ground.

He took her hand and placed it on his arm.

“ Be calm, Fiorella,” he whispered, soothingly. “ Your pulse is fluttering like a frightened bird, poverina.”

"Call me that always, monsieur. It reminds me of some one who used to lay a big hand on my head and bless me in a voice that was very gentle."

"That must have been your father, little one."

"Perhaps so: but I cannot call to mind any face, so it must only have been an empty dream. Sometimes I look up at the beautiful stars, or the warm sun, and wonder if the glorious rays are shining down on living parents, whose hearts have long forgotten the poor desolate Fiorella. But, monsieur, I came to seek you for a reason, and I must not be absent longer from my home. Oh, if you could see my home, and listen to the terrible names that the femme Moret calls me, you would pity me! and yet I like those names better than Madame le Blanc's *cruel* kindness. I am afraid of *her*, monsieur—afraid that she has saved my body to do harm to my soul!" she exclaimed, vehemently.

There was a dead pause; and on the silence of the partially deserted park fell the sound of deep smothered sobs, which Fiorella vainly strove to subdue.

"Can I be of any service to make you happier, mademoiselle?" questioned L'Estrange, gently but very gravely.

"Yes, monsieur." And she gazed up imploringly at him, clasping her hands in entreaty, and looking the incarnation of beauty in her grief. "You can make me happy if you will, for you can take me away from Madame le Blanc, and hide me where she will never, never see me more! Let me be your servant, and I will pray Heaven night and day to bless you for your mercy and kindness to one so unfortunate as I. I would not dare to ask you to do

this, but you look good, and I have no one that I can trust in the wide, wide world."

Pure as an angel, without a thought of sin, Fiorella had grown up like a beautiful wild flower. She adored, with all the ardour of an impassioned heart, the "Great Spirit," and she traced His power in every lovely form of nature. Each beam of light, each glistening leaf, each blushing blossom, seemed to her fervid imagination like living things, speaking to her of Him whose home was in the vaulted sky, and on whom she looked as her only friend.

A baser-minded man than L'Estrange might have tried to unveil to the girl's innocent eyes the magnitude of her crime against social laws, in preferring such a request as she had done on so slight an acquaintance. But Clement's sense of delicacy and refinement were not blunted by intercourse with the world, and he recognised at once the guileless spirit beside him. He saw at once that Fiorella's very terror of Madame le Blanc was a feeling utterly uncomprehended by herself, and simply the instinctive antipathy that a really pure soul has for an evil one.

The waif thrown in his path, friendless and lonely, and to whom beauty was a terrible misfortune rather than a priceless gift, was an object sacred in his eyes. He swore to himself that any harm that her imagination pictured should be averted from her, and that her implicit and childlike trust in him should never be betrayed. Like a young sister, she should be protected by his arm from every ill ; and, Heaven willing, his desire to be of service to her would meet with good result.

He laid his hand caressingly but reverently, as a brother might have done, upon her head, that, accord-

to her wont, she had uncovered, while her hat
g on her arm ; and pushing back gently the hair
clustered thickly on her fair forehead, he looked
a minute steadily into her eyes, as if to read
ther all was genuine within her.

he smiled plaintively as she met his scrutiny, but
e was no effrontery in the mournful expression of
luminous orbs, fringed by heavy lashes, that
kly drooped over flushing cheeks.

Fiorella, my child, I *will* help you, and put you
e way of a better life than that which seems to
before you now. You *may* trust me, poverina,
all your heart, and I promise that your faith
l never be destroyed. Meet me here in a week,
bring with you all that belongs to you."

I have nothing, monsieur ; only these poor
hes," she whispered low, blushing hotly as she
wed her poverty. "Except these and my guitar!"
And she took from her bosom a chaplet of ivory
ds, to which a small crucifix was attached, and
m a leathern pouch at her side an illuminated
seal, very old and much used.

"This chaplet was round my neck when the gipsy
k me from my home ; and see, monsieur ! at the
k of the crucifix is carved 'Fiorella,' which must
ve been my mother's name ; so they called me after
; but I have no right to a surname, hélas ! Mon-
ur, I often fancy that I must be only a poor gipsy
n after all, for I love the fresh free breeze that
ms to come straight down from heaven to calm my
in when it burns with miserable thoughts ; and I
e the great blue canopy above, and the delicious cool
age that, rocked backwards and forwards by the
et west wind, whispers like angels' voices in my

ear whenever I am all alone. I know, I feel that I could not live deprived of these; that without the blessed sun and flowers, and the singing of the birds, the poor child of the desert would die."

Her dark eyes flashed like diamonds, and her mobile face was flushed with animation as she spoke words that conveyed to Clement farther proofs of her innate innocence. No soul, he thought, but a good one, would find its best happiness in the beautiful but pure pleasures of nature. He could not refrain from gazing at her with undisguised admiration and curiosity combined. She was so strange an anomaly, as, garbed and bred like a vagrant, she yet presented the aspect of a youthful saint 'neath the light of the starry sky—so holy and so fair!

He looked at her, and then he glanced up towards heaven, and then and there registered a vow that a spirit so sinless should be preserved from stain or soil if it were in his power to avert evil from it.

"Never cease to cherish the love you have for such things, little one; it will guard you from evil. 'Tis a thousand pities if the world and its foolish pomps and vanities ever chase stars and blue skies and soft murmuring breezes from your heart. You shall leave your present abode, but not to become my *servant*, Fiorella! You *may* be, for aught we know, the daughter of kings or a noble marchesa in your own right!" he laughed, trying to draw her out of her habitual sadness of demeanour.

"Oh, monsieur, I shall never thank you enough! what *can* I say to you?" she exclaimed joyfully with bright dancing eyes, as she realized the purport of his words, and dreamed of her emancipation from the life she hated. Then she burst into a great shower of

tears, and stooping down as if to hide them, L'Estrange felt a pair of warm lips rest lightly on his hand ; but before he could speak again, the girl had flitted away in the dusk of the evening.

L'Estrange wended his steps slowly towards his home, through the crowded Parisian thoroughfares, with his gaze bent downwards, and his brain busy in endeavours to discover a way by which his promise to Fiorella might be quickly carried out. It was a difficult task to accomplish for one in his position, but he was determined to work heart and soul in so good a cause. It was a wondrously subtle spell that the girl exercised over him. Her soft sweet eyes seemed to have stolen into his brain, as it were, and their pleading looks haunted him vividly long after she had left his side.

As he walked along thinking of her and of her utter loneliness, it even entered his head as to whether he could marry her, that he might give her the home and protection she wanted. True, he did not actually love her with the love that he had pictured he would give to the woman who should be his wife ; but he pitied her from the inmost recesses of his soul, and pity was akin to love.

Still he could not but remember that he came of a proud old stock, and that he was heir to all the broad lands of stately Holmsleigh. It was almost a duty he owed to his family to marry "well," according to the world's phraseology ; and even if he dispelled the glittering visions of his parents with regard to his forming a brilliant alliance, he felt that he lacked the moral courage to set all social distinctions at complete defiance by wedding a mere waif ; he felt that he dared not offer to the acceptance of his people one

who was not only homeless and friendless, but whose birth was a sealed book that his power might never be able to penetrate. Reason and sound sense, qualities that he possessed to a great extent, bade him be firm in purpose in averting the evil of a great *mésalliance*, but a voice within him kept whispering that Fiorella was as pure and good as she was beautiful. And for a short while he wavered. Reason and a softer feeling, that on analysis would have been found to be only compassion and sympathy, combated together in his heart, and he resolved to let time reveal which would prove the stronger. Suddenly a plan for helping the girl to leave Madame le Blanc's protection presented itself to him. In one of the great white houses with important *porte-cochères* that front the charming Champs Elysées lived a middle-aged Scotch-woman, wealthy and independent.

Miss Sinclair was a distant cousin of Clement's; but he was well aware that no one occupied a greater place in her affections than himself, although no closer consanguinity existed between them. Years before, Katherine Sinclair had dearly loved her handsome kinsman, Allan L'Estrange, with whom she had been brought up during the early portion of her life, within the walls of a great grim castle in the north.

The sharer of her childish griefs and joys, and the daily companion of her ripper years, held the treasure of her strong steadfast heart completely within his grasp; but in spite of the jewel that that heart might have been to him if he had chosen to retain it as his own for ever, he let it slip away, preferring in its stead the puerile unstable affection of an insipid girl whom he met at an out-station in the far East.

When Colonel L'Estrange returned, after years of

absence, to his native country, debilitated in constitution, a wreck in appearance, and accompanied by his wife, Katherine transferred the affection of her nature to Clement, the only child of her old love. Warm-hearted and brimful of kindness, her Scotch breeding had fostered a certain reserve that bordered on prudery in her character, and that made itself visible in her manner, especially to strangers; a sincere Christian, without a vestige of cant or hypocrisy in her composition, she was in nowise austere or narrow-minded; yet, by force of education and constant association with persons that were not of the "world," she held strict opinions on all that appertained to morality. Her creed was not only to avoid the committal of evil, but also to refrain from aught that gave the appearance of wrong-doing. Hers had been one long and blameless existence, so pure and so immaculate that no malicious tongue had ever ventured to wag in disrespect, and no finger had ever pointed to her but in praise and esteem. She led a singularly lonely life in the gay French capital, courted by many for her exceeding worth and unbounded wealth, but possessing no intimate acquaintances. With so few outlets apparently for her softer feelings, it was marvellous that she had not become with age egotistical and selfish; but she was neither of these, and none knew better than Clement the wisest method to appeal to her sympathy and kindness.

It was a happy thought that had suggested to him so able a coadjutor in his scheme for aiding Fiorella, and instead of returning homewards, he hastened his footsteps towards the Champs Elysées, though it was an unusual hour for visiting. Fortunately Miss Sinclair was within and alone.

"Well, Clement, how are you?" was her greeting to him, accompanied by the bright and cordial smile and warm hand-clasp that were privileges Clement had ever been accorded. "I have not seen you for a century, and I began to fear you had forgotten me."

L'Estrange returned her smile a little gravely; his manner was rather constrained, and he was unusually silent.

Her quick eyes scanned his face curiously.

"And now that you *are* here in body, you appear to be absent in mind. You are not in any trouble, surely?" she questioned, with solicitude.

"Not exactly in trouble, Aunt Katherine," he answered, addressing her as he had been wont to do since his boyhood; "but in a dilemma, which is almost as bad. However, you can help me materially out of it, if you like to do so."

"If I *like*, Clement! You know I have always been willing to serve you, ever since you were as high as the table there," she exclaimed, affectionately. "What is it all about?"

"A woman, Aunt Katherine;" and L'Estrange pursed-up his lips hard to control himself from laughing outright at the alarmed expression of his hearer's countenance.

"Surely you have not fallen in love with any one that your father would disapprove of?"

Even now, although time had dispelled romance in her heart, and placed many a silver thread amidst Katherine Sinclair's nut-brown tresses, she had still a lingering tenderness and consideration for Allan L'Estrange in her heart.

"Who is the lady?"

"An angel in gipsy garb; a sweet suffering innocent; a homeless, friendless, and nameless girl!"

"Clement!"

"Yes, Aunt Katherine."

"Has love driven you crazy, that you should talk to me of such a person and in such a strain? Bad enough if you had allowed your heart to lead you into caring for the daughter of some tradesman: she might at any rate be respectable, even if her birth was low; but I certainly thought that you were above such miserable riffraff as you have been describing."

"Aunt Katherine!" and Clement both felt and looked angry as he rose from his chair and prepared to leave the room—"you are decidedly not yourself to-night; you, whom I have always considered in the light of a true Christian, full of charity and kindness, whom I have ever looked upon as a model of every feminine virtue, have shown yourself as narrow-minded, and I may almost say as cruelly censorious, as most of your sex, in launching thus vehemently into a sweeping condemnation of one of whose real character you are in perfect ignorance. I came here this evening to beg for your help, and I find even common sympathy is wanting."

"Sit down, Clement, and do not be so hasty. I did not intend to vex you. Now tell me what I can do for you?" she said, in a conciliatory tone.

L'Estrange placed himself beside her, and took advantage at once of the softer feeling she displayed.

"The story I have to tell you is rather a strange one, I fear, and any one else but you, Aunt Katherine, might scarcely give credence to it; but you will not

doubt my veracity, surely, since from my childhood I do not remember that you have ever found me guilty of a falsehood.

"I had better begin my story by telling you that it is a woman that I am troubled about, but that I am not 'in love' with her, although she is the purest of maidens, and as beautiful as a houri.

"I met her a short time back, quite by accident, and confess that I was struck by her appearance and demeanour, that contrasted most curiously with her attire and surroundings. Her name is 'Fiorella,' and she is only a poor little waif, thrown by misfortune upon hands that are ill-fitted, indeed, to guide her towards heaven, though, by right of innate goodness, her natural home should be heaven, and her companions the saints that dwell there.

"She is most unhappy, and she has not a single friend upon earth. Now, will *you* be her friend, Aunt Katherine?" he asked passionately, seizing her hands and looking her steadily in the face. "Can you be brave and noble enough to eschew all your aristocratic prejudices, to risk censure from the world, and, with all your heart in the task, save a sister soul from an evil fate, perhaps from utter ruin, with no guarantee for your safeguard but my simple assurance that Fiorella is in every respect a fit object for your charity and goodness? Will you do this, Aunt Katherine?"

Miss Sinclair was silent; all her cherished notions of delicacy and refinement rose up in arms against a proceeding which might entail on her close contact with an impostor, a vagrant. She shrank, with all the sensitive pride of her haughty race, from the possible disgrace that so strange a protégée might bring upon her. But these reflections swayed her

only for a moment; the next instant her kind heart was overflowing with pity, and she grew eager to befriend the object of Clement's solicitude. Her faith in her young kinsman was unlimited, and she felt assured that he had spoken the plain unvarnished truth, and that no shadow of duplicity lurked behind his words.

"Clement, if this poor child is as miserable and forlorn as you tell me, I will charge myself with her welfare, and will promise to make her as happy as lies in my power. Bring her here, if you wish, and as soon as you like. Katherine Sinclair, with her multitude of faults, is the last person in the world to begrudge kindness when it is deserved."

"Katherine Sinclair is the best woman alive, and I will pledge my existence that she will never have cause to regret her goodness to poor Fiorella," L'Estrange exclaimed warmly, pressing a grateful kiss upon the fair aristocratic hand, with its tapering fingers and shell-like nails.

Punctually at the appointed hour Fiorella waited in the Parc de Monceaux; but, frightened at the step she had taken, her face was deathly pale and her voice trembled as she spoke to Clement, and ever and anon her dark eyes glanced hastily backwards, in dread of beholding Madame le Blanc's portly form in her vicinity. L'Estrange strove hard to reassure her; but as they approached their destination, her nervousness and agitation seemed to increase, and Clement was glad to leave her to the kind offices of Miss Sinclair.

It was on the evening of the day that Fiorella found peace and shelter in the great white house in the Champs Elysées, that L'Estrange, at a ball given in

Paris by the Austrian ambassador, looked for the first time upon Isabel Mowbray.

PART III.

LITTLE Cupid! most eccentric and omnipotent of gods! Mortals, looking upon his hyacinthine locks, his chubby cheeks and unmeaning face, can hardly be impressed with a due idea of the infinite power that he possesses over all the world, in spite of the imposing bow and arrow with which his tiny hands are armed.

The freaks and pranks too in which he oftentimes indulges are not only dangerous, but extremely curious, and the insanity known as "love at first sight" is undoubtedly one of his greatest eccentricities; for it appears to common sense a strange and very incredible fact that a human heart, and more especially a *man's* heart, which as an accepted belief is full of strength and firmness of purpose, should succumb in the "twinkling of an eye" to the mere influence of a face, and yield up its best and deepest feelings helplessly, wholly, nay, even slavishly, to the attraction of a pair of melting orbs, dimpled mouth and chin, a pouting rosy lip, or a finely pencilled brow. "Yet again and again, and oft again," as quoth a familiar poet, this absurd drama of suddenly ignited passion has been enacted upon the earth; for

"Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round;
And every day, beneath its sway, old fools and young abound."

It was not marvellous, then, that Clement L'Estrange, albeit he lacked neither brain nor wisdom, fell headlong into the honeyed *piège* laid for him by the cunning deity; but in sooth he had ample excuse.

The soft and moonlit eyes and tender southern beauty of the waif had attracted him greatly, and enchained his attention for awhile; but notwithstanding the potent charm they might have exercised over some hearts, they had failed to excite any sentiment in Clement's breast beyond a keen appreciation and admiration.

Perhaps a profound and sincere pity and sympathy for the lonely and unhappy girl had been the nearest approach to love that he had experienced towards her. Somehow it had seemed to him, especially in his second interview with her, as if Fiorella was scarcely a creature of everyday mould; and he had found himself likening her loveliness to that of some rare tropical flower, so exquisite and so fragile, that to attempt to touch it would be to brush off all its splendid bloom; and, in truth, although she had grown up uncultivated and uncared for, the innate religion of her soul and the poetry of her nature rendered her very dissimilar to most of her sex, and raised up an invisible barrier between her and the coarse and gross spirits that had surrounded her from her earliest infancy. L'Estrange, recognising her extreme purity of mind and true innocence, felt as though even a declaration of passion, such as he would have lightly uttered in the ears of any aristocratic dame, would sully the hearing of a being young in years, and younger still in a knowledge of the world and its manifold iniquities. Fiorella's heart was a beautiful book, on the virgin pages of which he shrank from trying to trace aught that might prove to be indelible, and perchance injurious to its owner. The earth contained too many flaunting flowers, rearing their gorgeous heads on high, and

ready to be plucked and worn close to his heart, or else to be thrown away when their beauty was faded and dead, for Clement to desire for one moment the cruel gratification of spoiling for ever and aye the bloom and beauty of the little wild blossom he had picked up by the wayside, and handled with all the gentleness of a woman and the delicacy that was natural to him ; and Fiorella, with her sweet face and snow-white soul, was a sacred thing for him.

In company with his brother attachés he had attended the grand rout given by the Princess Metternich, whose well-known munificence and quoted taste had converted the Austrian embassy into a scene of glittering splendour such as was worked by Aladdin's wonderful lamp ; a paradise of enchantment, peopled by houris bedecked in gems that shamed the sun and moon in brightness.

But L'Estrange was a guest more from a sense of duty, or rather social obligation, than from any prospect of enjoyment in view. His disposition was inclined to cheerfulness, but he felt less in a mood for "society" at the ball than he remembered ever having felt before. His thoughts were fully engrossed by the events of the day, and by the desolate child whom his efforts had succeeded in helping to a holier and more congenial home, and to whose future welfare he had vowed his best and most energetic services.

With the clasp of Fiorella's little trembling fingers still lingering on his palm, and with the wistful grateful look of Fiorella's face, as he left her in Miss Sinclair's charge, still fresh in his memory, he wandered listlessly through the magnificent saloons, acknowledging mechanically, after the fashion of an automaton, the presence of his acquaintances, but not noticing any



one individual of the throng. So much of his life had been passed in scenes of the kind, with fairy bowers of roses, sparkling fountains of fragrant attar, and winsome women's faces, that he never glanced to right or left of him, until of a sudden, right before him, retarding his progress, stood a figure—an angel enveloped in fleecy clouds, he thought; but no, only a girl tall and slight, with shoulders and arms rounded and moulded like a statue's, and clad in diaphanous masses of white, that floated round her in undulating waves—a girl with a face whose skin was like purest alabaster, save a delicate rose tint on softest cheeks. The wavy red-gold hair, that gleamed and scintillated beneath the dazzling lights, was drawn away from the blue-veined temples into heavy coils, falling low upon the snowy neck. Every feature was faultless, but it was the eyes—the wonderful dark grey eyes, so dreamy and so languid, with white lids fringed by the longest and blackest lashes in the world—that cast a subtle spell over L'Estrange. Like loadstones they enchained his gaze, and, as he stood breathless and still, there must have been a magnetic attraction in his look; for his glance was returned, and it seemed to Clement as though two kindred souls had recognised one another in that instant. If he had been on the alert he might have heard the flutter of Cupid's wings hard by, or a satisfied chuckle from the wicked urchin.

The next moment, and the beauty that had been the dream of his life, as the only type of loveliness to which involuntarily his soul and senses would render homage, flitted past him and was lost to view in the mazy crowd.

It appeared to him as if the rooms had suddenly darkened, and their gay trappings assumed a sombre

aspect, while the strains of lively music jarred upon his nerves and caused an unwonted irritability of temper. As though a powerful love-philtre had been administered to him, all the lassitude and indifference he had experienced in the earlier portion of the evening were driven away by the bright apparition of his enchantress, and he plunged bravely into the intricate ins and outs of a quadrille, in the direction that she had taken.

Like a will-o'-the-wisp she led him in pursuit, his eyes and heart full of the radiance she had suddenly flashed into them; and Fiorella, with her fantastic grace and her burden of griefs, passed as completely from his mind as though they had never been, her image displaced or rather erased by one a thousand times more brilliant as Clement, with strangely throbbing heart, and hot flushing face, bent in introduction to Isabel Mowbray, while she returned his bow with a smile out of which all the coldness and hauteur habitual to her were missing. They were both young and handsome, and they had both fallen into love at first sight; and before the close of the ball the white lids frequently shaded the dark grey eyes as they drooped beneath Clement's fervent glance, and the small gloved hands shook slightly as they received a parting pressure, although the parting was only till the morrow.

Isabel Mowbray was a famous Transatlantic belle, and the crowning toast of the fastidious Jockey Club, whose fiat was supreme in Paris circles; all the *élite* bowed down to that fiat as meekly as though despotism and not taste ruled the world of fashion. Isabel was a favoured guest at the Court of the Tuileries, and fêted by the French *noblesse*, while the *grandes dames* of the Impératrice Eugénie copied her coiffure and her toilettes.



She was a native of Philadelphia, and the only daughter and heiress of one of its merchant princes ; but, resident in la belle France since her childhood, any trace of her nationality was lost in the purest and most liquid of Parisian accents.

From numerous sister Americans, who were all more or less attractive, she carried away the palm undeniably, and bore her honours with the grace of a Venus, and the ease and dignity of a true-born queen.

L'Estrange awoke after the ball ill and unusually depressed. A vision had visited his slumbers that haunted him painfully. He dreamt that he was in a dread charnel-house, his limbs fettered by heavy irons ; around him, through the gloom, he saw rigid forms stretched upon lowly biers, with white coverings concealing their faces. Suddenly a figure arose from its recumbent attitude and approached him, placing one icy hand on his brow, while with the other it slowly removed the covering from its ghastly face, and the spirit of Fiorella the waif, with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, stood revealed to his horror-struck gaze. Then she spoke in low and unearthly tones.

" Oh, why have you sent me here, with none but the awful dead around me, with the narrow tomb for my everlasting home ? I loved the sun's bright rays, the blueness of the blessed sky, the fragrance of the flowers, the songs of the blithesome birds ; and here, here I have naught but eternal darkness, the damps of the grave, the canker of the worms. O, why have you sent me here ?" the voice wailed loudly and piteously in his ear ; and Clement, with beads of perspiration on his forehead, and his heart beating fast, opened his eyes to find his valet with a letter in his hand, making

futile attempts to rouse him from his heavy sleep. It was a missive from Miss Sinclair.

"DEAR CLEMENT,—Come to the Champs Elysées as early as you can. It is a good and gentle girl that you brought here, but so strange and sad. Perhaps your presence may bring a smile to her face, or at any rate chase away the tears from her eyes. The only gleam of brightness I have seen on her countenance was when I casually mentioned you. K. SINCLAIR."

"Poor child, poor Fiorella!" L'Estrange muttered to himself pityingly, as he perused the note. "Ugh! what a horrible dream I had about her last night!" and he could not restrain a shudder as the awful face of his vision returned to him.

He had found out that Isabel Mowbray would be in the galleries of the Louvre at an early hour of the day; but anxious to meet Miss Sinclair's wishes, he determined to call at the Champs Elysées before following his own strong inclination, which was to devote himself in the forenoon to art.

Fiorella was sitting at one of the lower windows of the great house, in a listless attitude; her cheeks were pallid, and stained as though she had been crying for many hours, and her dark eyes, encircled by a bistre shade, were heavy and sorrowful; but as Clement entered the room, she started up from her chair and rushed towards him, with eager outstretched hands, and the glad unreserved motion of a child, while a bright light suddenly irradiated every feature. Before she reached him, however, her mood and manner changed entirely into sedateness; and although she looked up affectionately at him, she never attempted to speak.

L'Estrange took her hand, and, leading her back to her seat, sat down close to her.

"Poverina, you look very unhappy. I fear I acted wrongly in bringing you here," he said, gravely and regretfully.

For all answer, she bowed her head down upon her hands, and burst into a great shower of tears.

"Come, little one," he whispered, soothingly, stroking her shining hair gently as he spoke, "you must not grieve like this, or I shall reproach myself sadly with having taken the 'child of the desert' from the life that perhaps suited her best."

"Oh, monsieur, you are very cruel to say that," she sobbed out. "You know that my life in the faubourg was hateful to me before I saw you, and knew that you felt for me. I am not ungrateful to you for having brought me here—indeed, indeed I am not; but although the lady who has taken pity on me is kind and noble, I cannot help feeling so sad, monsieur, so *alone*. With you by my side I am quite happy; it is because you have been so good to me, because in you the poor Fiorella has found a true friend."

"Listen to me, my child," and L'Estrange essayed to put on an air of paternal interest, and threw as much seriousness as he could muster up into his accents. "Miss Sinclair deserves something better from you than tears and repinings. She desires to be your best friend, your saviour, in fact, from a future that might have been a terrible one. You are pure and innocent now, and I have besought her aid to keep you so; do not defeat the object I have had in view by yielding to childish sorrow; do not make me repent already that I have taken you away from

your home with Madame le Blanc, or I shall take you back to her, Fiorella."

"Oh, no, monsieur, you will never do that?" she questioned piteously, looking completely aghast at his unexpected threat. "I will cry no more; I will laugh, and dance, and sing, to show you that I *am* grateful." And she seized her guitar, which was never far from her, and commenced, in her birdlike plaintive voice,

"I Gorgheggiante Angelli
Coll' alternante suono
Saran dolce diletto
Dopo il baleno e il suono
Ombra mi darà il bosco,
Avrà di me il ciel cura;
Ma non sarà più quella
La povera Fiorella."

But she broke down at the end of a verse, and throwing the instrument on the sofa hard by, she clasped her hands and murmured, with the softest of southern tones.

"To know that I have angered you would break my heart: but to please you, monsieur, Fiorella would die!"

There was no blush upon her cheek as she gave breath to her thought, although there was a world of unconscious pathos and passion in her voice; and Clement, whose heart, even while he was beside her, had gone out to Isabel Mowbray, never even dreamed that the girl's soul was fast filling with his own image.

She grew calmer as she sat there, with her eyes fixed lovingly on L'Estrange's face. But he read no tenderness in their limpid depths; a dog that loved him would have looked at him with just the same sort of glance, it was so honest and faithful and affectionate.

After a little while, Katherine Sinclair entered the salon, and Fiorella, with hesitating step approaching her, took her hand humbly and pressed a kiss upon it, with a deprecating expression on her countenance. Katherine, surprised, stooped down and returned the caress warmly on the girl's forehead, while Clement laughed pleasantly at the pretty tableau that the two made; and when, a few moments afterwards, he rose to take his leave, satisfied that his work would meet with good result, a bright smile upon Fiorella's lips was the last sight he looked upon.

The hours flew by on rosy wings, and days lengthened into weeks unconsciously to L'Estrange, as, rapt in a halcyon dream of first love, the only landmark of time he knew was the presence or absence of Isabel Mowbray.

Fair and irresistible autocrat, her sway had become an absolute one; and under its all-enthalling spell, Clement, forswearing all the favourite pursuits of other days, turned into a carpet knight, content to look on no fiercer weapons than the distaff and the needle. There was no light for him in the world like the light of the dark gray eyes; and basking luxuriously beneath their summer splendour, he asked no farther bliss. His empress condescended to love him too, in her own imperial way, and yet with an amount of truth and fervour that few would have believed could emanate from the breast of the proud and beautiful statue, that had never shown signs of warmth or relenting towards the scores of slaves in her train. What wonder, then, that L'Estrange, picturing to himself that he was a modern Pygmalion, devotedly adored the being inspired by himself with such feeling and passion?

"The course of true love never did run smooth," was an axiom disproved in this case; but though completely engrossed with the state of his own heart, Clement yet continued to visit the house in the Champs Elysées from time to time, although, had his real sentiments been analysed, perchance it would have been found that his interest in his protégée had flagged considerably; that even during lengthened absences, which his attendance on his fiancée unavoidably occasioned, the very existence of the poor little waif was a matter of oblivion. But whenever, by a strenuous effort, he succeeded in passing a flying half-hour with her, Fiorella's welcome should have been an ample reward for his self-sacrifice—she met him ever with a gladness that was as unfeigned as it was patent to all.

Either from an intense dread of being sent back to the feared Madame le Blanc, or else from an earnest desire to please L'Estrange, she had implicitly obeyed his behest to eschew melancholy and to don the garb of joy. No tear was ever seen to glisten on her jetty lashes, and no shadow of a shade traversed her brow. Apparently blithe as the birds that she loved so well, she was the one ray of sunshine in the great dull mansion, which, with all its grandeur and imposing aspect, lacked liveliness *au fond*. Petted by Katherine Sinclair, whose affections had been captured completely by the girl's soft and engaging manner and gentle character, Fiorella's life appeared as unutterably serene as it was blameless.

To all around she seemed like a happy child, free from every earthly care; but none who could have seen her alone in her own room, would have deemed her careless or joyous. Kneeling beside the little

white-curtained bed, with the ivory chaplet and crucifix and the old worn Missal clasped tightly to her bosom, and with big tears streaming down her cheeks, she sent up her fervid and innocent prayers to the "Blessed Mother of God," mingling with the name of the parents that were dead to her that of a living man.

None knew how each morning that dawned brought with it a hope that was often fallacious, but which flushed her face and lent a brightness to her eyes ; but when he, whom in her inmost soul she unconsciously worshipped with all the ardour of a child of the south, was beside her, the crimson rose paled from her cheek beneath the timidity that his presence brought. And L'Estrange only saw that Fiorella was happy and contented, and that the beauty that had attracted his admiration had gained and ripened into greater loveliness under the influence of a good and holy home.

It was the month of November, the "month of suicides." Autumn tints were upon the trees, while Nature was slowly sighing out her regrets at the coming death of the old year ; but in the beginning of the new, Isabel Mowbray had consented to be Clement's wife, and with this in prospect, no marvel that, with Cupidon's bandage tight over his eyes, he failed entirely to perceive aught that was irrelevant to the one great event of his life, which was to bring him happiness ineffable and eternal.

" Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungallèd play ;
For some must watch and some must sleep,
Thus runs the world away !"

The daylight was waning fast, and the broad avenue that runs through the Champs Elysées up to the Arc de

Triomphe was partially deserted, giving that fashionable *quartier* of Paris in the semi-darkness an aspect almost as still and as gloomy as that of a petty provincial town.

Unusually restless, Fiorella, like an elfin sprite, had fluttered from room to room, through bleak corridors, and up and down the huge staircase, until her wanderings had ended by her settling down in her favourite spot—a species of *omnium gatherum*, in which all the finest paintings and rarest statuary, besides other *objets d'art* that Katherine Sinclair's taste and money had procured, were collected. The windows of the room looked on to the small square court that lay in front of the mansion, and Fiorella, coiling herself up in an Eastern fashion, as was her wont, in one of the cushioned recesses, looked out dreamily and sadly on the marvellously-dreary prospect.

Clement had not approached the place for a very much longer period than he had ever allowed to elapse before, and the poor girl's heart swelled high within her at the thought that either he was ill, or else that he had forgotten her. A feeling of utter loneliness was in her breast, and, worse than all, she was unable to give vent to her fears and anxieties, restrained by some impulse more powerful than herself from making a confidante of Miss Sinclair.

A door opened quietly, but, fancying it was one of the lackeys, Fiorella never turned her head, until of a sudden a hand touched her shoulder gently, and starting round in dismay and surprise, she found L'Estrange beside her, looking down upon her with a bright smile on his lips.

He was not ill, he looked so happy, and he had *not* forgotten her after all, were the thoughts that passed rapidly through her mind.

"O, monsieur," she cried joyously, oblivious of her habitual quietude and sedateness in the pleasure and astonishment of beholding that beloved face again, "you have come at last; thank Heaven for that! I began to be afraid that some harm had happened to you, that I should never, *never* see you more!"

And there was a big falter in her voice as she uttered the last words; but, excited and happy like a child, she did not allow him time to answer before she continued—

"But you *are* come, and I shall forget all that I have suffered!" and she pressed a fervent kiss upon his hand.

L'Estrange visibly started as he felt the contact of those soft warm lips. It was the second time he had felt it.

The first time, in the twilight and amidst the loneliness of the Parc de Monceaux, with a tender pity in his heart for the unfortunate waif, and with no other woman's image stirring the depths of his soul, he had experienced nothing but kindness at that soft kiss, accepting it as an innocent tribute of gratitude for his help; but now it appeared to him as though that caress was an infringement of loyalty to his betrothed, and he shrank from it involuntarily.

Fiorella's glance, sharpened by affection, noted a cold look steal over his features as he drew himself away from her; and thinking that the exhibition of her feelings had degraded her for ever in his opinion, and angered him beyond forgiveness, she crept away to the far end of the large saloon, and casting herself down on the floor, gave way to an abandonment of grief that shook her slight frame with its vehemence.

Clement, with the sound of those heartbreaking sobs in his ear, forgot all his notions of reserve. In a moment he was kneeling by the girl's side, murmuring softly—

"Fiorella, *dear* Fiorella!"

As the expression of endearment fell from his lips, she glanced up through the storm of wild passionate tears with a world of eloquence in her eyes.

L'Estrange saw the mistake that he had made at once. A light was breaking upon him fast, and he knew now that, in lieu of having been the cause of gladdening the child's life, he had unwittingly become the instrument of inflicting upon her the bitterest woe.

"Fiorella, little one, I never meant to wound or anger you," he said kindly.

"You could not *anger* me, monsieur. I feared that I had offended you. I forgot, in the great joy of seeing you again after so long a time, that I am too lowly and unfortunate to dare to touch your hand!"

And a warm blush dyed her face up to her very temples, as she remembered the gesture with which he had withdrawn his palm.

L'Estrange hesitated for an instant as to what he should reply; then he made up his mind that it was better to tell her all the truth. Another time he would have avowed his approaching marriage to her with all the frankness and bravery imaginable; but since the ebullition of feeling that had just been displayed for the first time, his courage sank a little, and he shrank from making his confession.

"Fiorella, if I drew away my hand from you, it was not because I think you 'lowly.' You are an angel of purity and goodness, little one, and no woman

can desire to be 'greater' than that. Destiny may have placed you in an unfortunate position, but nothing but your own actions could ever debase you in *my* eyes. There is a reason for what I did, Fiorella, and I will tell you what it is—this hand of mine belongs to some one else!"

Fiorella started to her feet, and faced him with dilated startled eyes and a face that turned of an ashen hue.

"To some one else?" she repeated slowly, in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper.

Young, for she had barely reached womanhood, and ignorant of the world, the strong instinct of love, omnipotent even in wild animals, suggested to her at once the meaning of his assertion.

"Yes, to some one else, who will be my wife in the beginning of the new year. O, Fiorella, on the merry *jour de l'an* what a precious gift will be mine?"

His words were a deathstroke to the child of the south, who had loved naught but the sun and the flowers and the murmuring west wind before she looked upon Clement L'Estrange.

As she listened to him, Fiorella's heart gave a great leap, and her lips grew colourless and trembling. It seemed to her in that moment as if the light of the glorious sun had set for ever, and the bloom and fragrance of the flowers had died away from the earth; but Clement, with the thought of Isabel Mowbray uppermost, spoke on, never heeding that each syllable was a sharp stab in the girl's white breast.

"And I love her, Fiorella—ay, love her with a steadfast enduring love surpassing any that man has felt before! To me she is best and most beautiful of all the world! O, Fiorella, you are better than I am,

give me your earnest prayers that the dream of my life may be accomplished, that she whom I worship will soon be my own for ever!"

The child fell on her knees. Clement fancied that, good and obedient to his smallest will, she was already praying for his welfare and happiness. Her dark eyes uplifted bore a rapt expression, and her lips were parted slightly asunder; but in another moment a shriek burst from them, and, stricken down like a blighted lily, the waif lay cold and senseless on the ground.

Paris arrayed in winter's garb was Paris still. No other capital in the world could compete with it in life and liveliness, even though frost hung pendent like diamonds to each leafless bough, and the sunbeams fell pale and powerless upon the earth.

Paris, covered with a winding-sheet of snow, would still have borne a merry aspect to all those whose hearts and homes were free from care. But to Fiorella, who loved so dearly the blueness of the summer's sky, the fragrant bloom of roses, the carolling of the gladsome birds, the wintry blast apparently brought death. Four weeks had passed since the evening when the tidings of Clement's approaching marriage had fallen on her ears like a thunderbolt.

She had never understood the feelings of her own heart, or even questioned them. The thought that she loved L'Estrange had never entered her mind; unconsciously she had drifted into passion, and yielded up her whole soul to him, until without him she could not live. She had never dreamed of him as a lover. Crude and wild, her nature possessed the unselfish devotion and the unerring fidelity that characterize the



savage. It was quite enough for her to sit by his side, to gaze upon his face, to listen to every tone of his voice ; and now and then, when he called her " Poverina," in the kindly accents that she knew so well, and when he clasped her hand in friendly greeting, she felt that she wanted nothing more. Willingly she would have been his slave, infinitely blest by the reward of her master's smile. The hope of L'Estrange ever belonging to her was one that her extreme humility of spirit would never have admitted ; but the bitter knowledge that he would ere long belong to another, that an eternal barrier would be raised between her and him, drove the blood from her heart, and paled her cheek with the ashen pallor of death. Yet she never murmured ; so quiet and so gentle, for *he* had bidden her be so ; she even forced back the tears to their burning source, to do his behest to the very letter. And when L'Estrange came, she met him with the same soft smile hovering on her lip, while she covertly bit it hard to restrain it from trembling. Only a child, yet she was as brave as a true woman in concealing the sorrow that sapped at her life.

And Clement, whose feelings had been a mixture of pity and remorse since the night of his confession, looked in surprise at the calmness she displayed, and began to fancy that it was only the wintry wind, after all, that was blowing the daughter of sunny climes so quickly to her grave.

Several days had glided by without awarding him a release from his manifold devoirs, both as a diplomat and a lover, when a short missive was put in his hand, just as he was hurriedly finishing his toilette for a great political feast at the embassy to which he was attached.

"Come to us quickly, Clement, for heaven's sake. I believe the poor child Fiorella is dying. She has only spoken once to-day, and it was to ask for you.—K. S."

L'Estrange waited for nothing more, but snatching his hat, he rushed into the crowded street. It was New-year's eve, and as he walked along, his eyes glanced carelessly at the gay shops, filled with all manner of superb *étrennes*, that glittered in the gas-light.

"Ding, dong! ding, dong!" faint, but solemn and slow, it fell upon the air. He stopped for a minute to listen, with a strange dread upon him, as though it were a requiem for the poor Fiorella. But it was only the plaintive bell of the church of La Madeleine sounding for the Angelus.

He met Katherine Sinclair on the threshold, and one look at her countenance told him that there had been no exaggeration in her note.

It *was* true. The poor little waif was dying—dying quietly but fast, out of the bright world into the shadows.

L'Estrange stepped softly up the stone staircase, with a pallid cheek and a fast-throbbing heart. The snowy curtains of the little bed were drawn widely asunder, and upon the white pillow lay a face that was far whiter still.

Fiorella's long hair hung dishevelled over her shoulders, and the fire of her eyes was quenched in an infinite languor, while on her brow the seal of death was unmistakably set. Yet when her languid eyes caught sight of Clement's form, a sparkling light lit up her thin features, and she tried to hold out her

hand towards him, but it fell weakly down upon the coverlid.

L'Estrange bent over her, and it was no shame to his manhood that genuine emotion blinded his vision for a while.

"Fiorella, poverina! are you really so ill?" was all he could say, in low and choking tones.

"No, monsieur, I am not ill, for I feel no pain," she answered in an unsteady voice, so faint that he was forced to bend down lower to catch the words she uttered. "I am even better than I have been for a long, long while, for there was a dull and heavy weight on my heart, that has gone away. It only seems now as if some one I cannot see is taking my life away, and I have no strength to hold it fast. But never mind about *me*, monsieur; tell me if *you* are well and happy; for to-morrow is the blessed *jour de l'an*, and she whom you love so much will soon be your wife. Ah, monsieur!" she cried out, as if a sudden spasm had hurt her, and she pressed down her hand on her bosom to stop its heaving.

"O, my child, try and get better, that you too may have many glad new years. And, Fiorella, little one, believe that my happiness would be far greater if you were by to witness it."

"Never, monsieur; I shall never do that. Before your marriage-day, the desolate Fiorella will be lying in her dark and narrow grave."

Clement shivered as the memory of his dream came to him. He knew that it was his work, after all, that was sending the child to her tomb.

"I shall not see many suns arise upon the beautiful earth, monsieur, but I do not grieve. For a long, long while the light of the sun and the moon has

grown dimmer to me, the scent of the flowers more faint, the song of the birds more sad. I shall die quite happy, monsieur, for I know that you will soon have all you care for in the world close to your side," she faltered, trying to look up brightly in his face.

The mighty love in her breast was patent now to his eyes. This poor little waif in her dying hour forgetting herself in him, utterly unmanned him. He sobbed aloud.

Fiorella stretched out her fragile hand, and gently touched his arm.

"Do not sorrow for me, monsieur; it makes it less easy for me to die. You have ever been good and kind, you will promise now what I ask? Do not let them take me to Père la Chaise, with the awful dead all around me," she pleaded piteously—and again that terrible vision rose up vividly before him; "but lay me in a quiet spot, where in the solemn darkness of eternal night perchance the sweet west wind may murmur softly above me, and the holy stars peep pityingly down on the lonely home of the poor Fiorella; and, monsieur, the chaplet and crucifix that were once round my mother's neck, let them rest upon my breast, and the Missal by their side.

"Ding, dong! ding, dong! ding, dong!" It was the merry peal of all the church-bells in Paris ushering in the new year.

"Hush!" Fiorella whispered, as she listened intently to the chimes for a moment or so. "It is the happy *jour de l'an*, monsieur, and I have no *étrenne* to give you, only my old guitar. Will you keep it always for Fiorella's sake?"

"Yes, poverina, for ever and ever. And you, what gift can I offer you?"

She started up from her pillow, while for an instant a deep red glow overspread her sunken cheek, and a passionate gleam of light shone out of her eyes.

“*Kiss* me, monsieur; just once, just once!”

L'Estrange stooped and pressed his lips to hers. Even Isabel Mowbray would have pardoned that embrace. When he raised his head, Fiorella's spirit had left the earth.





E V E.

PART I.

COME back to me! come back to me,
Eve, my Eve!"
Oh, vain cry of my life! Yet again
and again the words fall from my lips,
finding their echo in my inmost soul.

* * * * *

Lying at full length on the soft gray sands of the lovely Kentish coast, with an old worn fishing-smack serving for protection from the broad noonday glare and the fervency of an August sun, with tired lazy eyes, that, half shut, winked and blinked as through their lashes they watched the languid and monotonous flapping of a white sail, that shone silvery under the golden beams many a mile out on the deep-blue main—neither sleeping, nor dreaming, nor thinking, but simply enjoying the luxury of sheer idleness and perfect repose to fullest bent; then suddenly awakening from my state of conscious coma to the sound of voices issuing from the other side of the tiny bark that shaded me from the fiery eyes of the sun-god, and from human sight as well.

"Eve, wake up, child! This is one of your queer days, assuredly."

the tones, which were a woman's, betokened a vision of character in the speaker, in spite of the fact that pervaded the accents as they fell on air.

"Hush, Eve! always dreaming the hours away! the world can you find to dream about?"

"Hush, Helen! Can you ask?" And a strange form for me rose up suddenly in my breast, in full, and most melodious voice. It seemed to come through and through. I held my breath, and with strained ear for the voice to come

"No, do you never feel, in such a scene as this, lifting up, as it were, from the dull earth, as everything around you was calm, and at peace and your own soul, rid for a while of mortal care free to soar up, up into regions as delicious, untrammelled?"

The enthusiastic tones paused as if at a loss for the wherewith to describe the bright Elysium of the tale and fervid imagination.

"Yourself!" laughed her companion. And her cold commonplace reply evidently dispersed the visions of heaven Eve's romantic visions; for she brought out a peal of sweet childish merriment. The voice had had a wondrous charm for me; but the silver laugh on my ears indolence vanished at once. I resisted no longer the prompting of inclination, lifting my head up from its sandy pillow, for a furtive survey of my neighbours, and looked the first time on my *Fate*.

She jot down her lineaments from memory. No skilful brush and palette could delineate her so faithfully.

A broad straw hat shaded the low white brow and small oval face, that was enframed in sun-kissed hair falling in bright wreaths down to her very waist. Eyes of truest blue, with a pensive look in the pellucid pupils; straight clear-defined brows, and marvellous lashes, and tiny features, with a pair of exquisitely-cut lips, so fresh, so red, so smiling; but even as I gazed, the laughter on them was suddenly hushed, and replaced by an expression of fear. Wringing her hands, she sprang hastily to her feet, and rushed to the edge of the beach, crying out—

“Helen, look! Harry is drowning!”

With a bound I reached the water, just in time to plunge in, and seize with one strong arm a little white waif, with pallid face and clinging rings of golden hair, that the great salt waves were carrying off in triumph on their huge shoulders as a propitiatory offering to Neptune in his palace of coral.

Then breathless, and dripping like a gigantic water-spaniel, I deposited my small burden safe in the girl's white outstretched arms, that closed on the restored treasure like a vice, while the true blue eyes shot a silent thanksgiving upwards. Then they looked at me humbly, gratefully, while the pretty lips, from which all the bright scarlet had completely faded, quivered very piteously.

“My mother will bless you for ever,” she tried to articulate plainly in her agitation. “My little brother is the pet; and if anything had happened to him, she would never, never have smiled again. Oh, I cannot thank you enough!”

And she gave me the tribute of an eloquent glance instead, amidst a shower of big glistening tears, that rained down on the little face that she kept pressing

close against her breast, as if fearful that some new danger might arise to snatch it away.

"You have nothing to thank me for," I said as quietly as I could, hoping by measured accents to soothe her emotion a little; but I never felt less calm in all my life. Outwardly I stood still and impassive; inwardly my soul was trembling and shaking under the power of the first breath of passion that had come to stir it. "I am only too thankful I was by to help you. Let me carry him home," I suggested. I pitied the girl, who could barely support the feathery weight she held; but I knew my offer was not suggested by mere compassion for her physical weakness.

I felt a violent uncontrollable desire to pursue the acquaintance Dame Fortune had thrown in my path, and nothing on earth could have induced me to give up the chance of looking again and again on the sweet face before me. Meanwhile Helen, whom I had rightly judged in my own mind to be of a sensible and practical turn, had quietly vanished from the scene of disaster on the recovery of the child, in order to accelerate the needful preparations for averting farther mischief to him in his semi-drowned condition.

"Harry has a very great antipathy to strangers when he is in his senses, even to those who look kind and good," she added apologetically. "But I think I may venture to give him in charge of you in his present state of unconsciousness."

And she bent anxiously over him for a moment; then she lifted up a very white face, and faltered out slowly, with big startled eyes looking wildly in my own—

"Surely he is not dead, after all, is he?"

I did not wonder in the least at her terrible surmise,

for the little one's features were cold and set, as though Death had imprinted his seal upon them, and his fingers were tightly clenched and interlaced together; but I was skilled enough in medical art to know that such appearances might naturally arise from the violent fright his mind must have received when he found himself drifting helplessly, hopelessly away farther and farther from *terra firma*, cradled on the summit of the waves, that must have appeared mountains high to such a wee sprite as he was.

"It is only the effects of alarm that he is suffering from; he will be all right presently," I reassured her in earnest tones; and she seemed to have faith in me at once, for the troubled look on her face changed into an expression of serenity, and pressing one kiss on his cheek, she put him gently and confidently into my arms.

Side by side, slowly and silently, we walked towards her home over the sandy shore; and as ever and anon the sea gave a low murmur behind us, I saw her wince and tremble at the recollection that that sullen roar might have been a requiem for the child she loved so well. I was not shy by nature, nor unsociable in disposition; but now I could not for the life of me think of one appropriate sentence to break the silence. It seemed to me as though any commonplace remark would be an insult to her, whom my soul had suddenly deified into an object of worship. Suddenly a pale apparition, with silvered hair and sable garments, caught the boy from me, and sitting down with him on the sands, sobbed great sobs that made my heart bleed and my eyes grow strangely dim.

"Mamma, mamma, please don't!" pleaded my

companion ; and down upon her knees fell the slight form, while two serious orbs gazed imploringly up into the mother's face.

I stood beside and looked on, feeling that henceforth the sight would never leave me—knowing that those tearful accents would one day breathe the fiat of my earthly destiny, that those blue eyes had already become the day-stars of my whole life.

"There is no cause for anxiety," I ventured to remark after a little while, trusting to stem the torrent of grief that was adding to the impromptu bath the poor little child had already received. "Might I advise his being placed in a warm bed at once as the quickest and surest mode of complete restoration?"

Mrs. Lindon visibly started at the sound of my voice, and stared up at me with a bewildered air. She had evidently never even noticed my proximity in the midst of her alarm for the pet lamb of the flock.

"The gentleman who jumped into the water and saved Harry," murmured the kneeling figure in her ear.

A pair of hands, very attenuated, but white as snow, were extended at once to clasp mine in a strong grasp, and a pair of anxious wistful eyes shone up full of earnest warmth and gratitude into my own.

"God for ever bless you!" she said, in a faltering voice, and these few almost inaudible words comprised all the thanks she gave me ; but somehow I felt, from the moment they were uttered, that, beside the blessing and the hand-clasp, she had given me a place in her heart.

There is no feeling that familiarizes people so quickly as genuine sorrow. Joy may be a more

sociable sentiment, but it utterly lacks the openness and unreserve engendered by real grief of any kind. Moreover, there is an inward instinct in human nature that detects true sympathy at a glance. Hilarity and a smiling countenance are easily put on, but it is hard work even to the most hypocritical to force *bona-fide* tears into the eye.

It was not very strange, then, that on the evening of the day that might have been marked down in black letters in the chronicles of the Lindons as the date of a watery grave, that I found myself in a flower-decked drawing-room, a favoured guest. The picture which that evening presented will never fade from the tablets of my memory. It lives there now in colours as fresh and as vivid as though I had looked upon it but yestere'en.

The big bay-window opening on to a broad expanse of rippling sea; the pleasant twilight gloam casting into deep shadow the dark-clad figure of my hostess as, seated within a far recess, she bent yearningly over the child she had nearly lost, with all the wonderful infinity of a mother's love depicted on her face.

Helen Carden, with a soul above romance, and affecting to disdain *in toto* all such puerilities as dashing waves and crimson-tinted skies, presided at the distant teaboard. And leaning anent the casement near, a maiden fair and sweet, with snowy flowing dress and a pure white rose in her bosom; towards whom my gaze wandered in spite of me, and once reaching its goal, was loth indeed to quit again.

After awhile, as the shades of evening fell lower over the earth, converse became fragmentary. It

seemed easier to look than to speak. Tongue-tied, my eyes revealed my feelings well ; for through the deepening gloom I could see a lovely flickering colour tinge soft rounded cheeks, and a conscious but not unkindly light in tender azure eyes.

Later I knew that I had been no arrogant dreamer, puffed up by foolish pride, when I fancied, even on that first evening, that a little palm had trembled like a birdling within my fervent clasp, and that two red lips had slightly trembled when they said a low good-night.

Later I knew that Eve loved me at first sight as passionately and truly as I loved her, and that after our meeting there were no more quiet scenes for her in which she desired to be lifted out of earth.

Earth had become unutterably pleasant. A mortal's power had changed it into the sweet Elysium that her fancy had been wont to picture and to long for !

PART II.

THREE weeks had glided swiftly by since the first glance that had sealed my life's destiny, since the first moment in which my darling had taken my heart from me by storm. And my sweet sovereign reigned autocratically over her dominion ; for closer bondage but riveted more closely the rosy links of the chain in which her power and will had bound me.

Her blue eyes were my heaven—and such a heaven !—promising in their serene clear depth peace and rest infinite to him who might bask in their holy light for ever. It was quite enough of bliss to sit by her dear side day after day upon the lonely beach, with the

glorious swelling billows murmuring a loud consent to our courting; to sit there with her hand fast locked in mine, her rosy lips shyly smiling now and then as our glances chanced to meet. Eve was truth and warmth, but she was reticent too—loth to show her feelings, as all maidens should be. Only sometimes nature would peep out beneath womanly reserve under the wondrous power of mutual love.

“Gerald!” In all my life I had never dreamed that such music was to be found upon earth, until my name, spoken by her mouth, came laden with irrepressible melody. Ay, and her lips lingered over it too, as though it was pleasant-sounding to her ears as well.

If it had pleased her to say “Gerald” continuously, and nothing more, I could have listened unwearingly and with eagerness to the one word, detecting fresh music in the repetition and content with such delicious tautology.

“Gerald!” she said, lifting up a sparkling impassioned look to my face, unveiling just for an instant the fervency of the soul within, “you are the guardian angel of us all! You dropped down from the skies just in time to save Harry from death and my mother from despair, and to give *me* life! For, Gerald, it *is* fresh life to be so very, very happy as I am now!”

And with this little outpouring of her heart, long shining tresses bestrewed my breast, and looking down, I saw only the tiny tip of a little pink ear as its owner’s head nestled closely to me. My love! my queen! Even then, in those moments, she seemed too pure and sacred a thing for human passion. I never dared to press an ardent caress on her mouth. I only longed to kneel to her, to breathe my worship



in language fit for the hearing of a saint. I never dreamt of letting my kisses fall but on fair dainty hands. And in the bright dawn of love, amidst the glorious sunshine of my existence, I was subject to an undefinable dread. I would find myself almost unconsciously gathering Eve closer in my arms, nearer to my heart, with a strange, a horrible presentiment that I should not hold her there for long. Oh God! it was fearful to picture that bright child, full of health, rich in beauty, hand-in-hand with the awful image of Death; yet again and again the vision rose up before me when her eyes shone bluest and her laugh pealed merriest—in the zenith of her loveliness, amidst her gentle caresses, that one terrible fancy came to madden me. I trembled each hour lest my treasure should be wrested from me, that before the flower of love should have fully bloomed the blossom would be wrenched away from my grasp. I idolized her blindly and devotedly, and perhaps one reason for the unlimited adulation of my soul was that hitherto mine had been a lonely and a loveless life. My father and my mother died when I was a child, and even a recollection of their faces had faded from my mind. The old-fashioned miniature, which was an heirloom, brought back no memories when I gazed upon it. I had no near of kin; and, above all, no woman's face had ever entered my heart. Fate had preserved my soul fresh and intact for the one being that I wanted for my wife. Eve stood in the light of every relative to me, and I felt for her the protecting attachment of a parent, the steadfast honest affection of a brother, the reverence of a devotee for his saint, the passionate love of a man to whom she was all in all upon earth!

She too had been fancy free till we met. She told me that her heart and soul had never owned another master, and I believed her—believed her because I could have staked my life on her truth and on her unerring fidelity. It was I, and I alone, whose power had stirred the soul of my Undine into being; it was my presence that had changed the statue, beautiful but cold as marble, into a living, breathing, loving woman; and it was my magic touch that could call up both warmth and colour.

Not marvellous, then, that like a second Pygmalion I adored the exquisite work of my own hands, that I trembled with impatience to have Eve for my very own.

I was but a miserable short-sighted mortal—down on my knees, with ardent pleading on my lips, I should have prayed Heaven to stay the flight of time, to lengthen each winged moment into years.

PART III.

LIFE became too beautiful with Eve as my wife, and in the utter fulness of earthly bliss perhaps I forgot to supplicate Heaven for its continuance, or else I was not good enough to live with an angel by my side. Anyway, in a little while after my marriage my angel's wings began to droop, and her sparkling brightness to fade. Though she was pure and holy, and much like her sister spirits above, yet her heart was in the keeping of a mortal, and an earthly love held her so desperately in its grasp, that even ruthless Death had compassion, and stayed his hand awhile. Day by day she dimmed visibly, became paler and

paler, the blue eyes growing holier, the form slighter. Yet she lingered beside me, and I hoped madly against hope. After a little while, we took a tiny baby and laid it in her breast, and my pulse throbbed high as I noted the cheek of my little one's mother flush once more with its wonted bloom, and a bright light of yore flash from the erewhile languid eyes.

"*Our* child," she whispered softly, as she pressed it to her. "Oh, my God! let me live for it and for him—my Gerald, my husband!" And she turned all her glance of love upon my face, and strove to clasp my neck with her weak arms, but she gently fainted away instead.

My poor little wife—so good, so submissive—this was the first time her lips had breathed a reluctance to do *His* will; the first time she had shown an unwillingness to die!

I looked at her, lying there so white and so still—and with the mist in my eyes, rebellion came into my heart. I dared to question the wisdom and justice that would snatch her away from me; she who thought no ill, who worked no woe, whose nature was perfect, and whose path was full of peace and happiness. Why, oh why, I asked, should she be taken, when the wretched, the outcast, the miscreant, to whom death is a boon, are left to linger on and on upon the face of this earth?

PART IV.

URGENT business called me away from home for a while; but though loth to quit the nest that held my darling bird, I felt happier and more hopeful than I

had done for many a long day. Eve had regained both colour and strength marvellously; and when I bent down for my parting look, I marked with a high throbbing heart the hues of health upon her cheek, and the renewed elasticity of the form I pressed so close within my arms. It was our very first parting since we had knelt side by side before the altar, and a few natural tears stood in my wife's blue eyes; but she dashed them away with a pretty gesture, and held up two rosy lips with a smile upon them towards me, and those sweet lips had to cry "*Peccavi!*" full many a time ere they were released again.

Impatient to find myself again with Eve, I accomplished the work I had to do a day or so earlier than I anticipated, and I walked home unexpectedly—Creeping noiselessly up the stairs, I passed in at the half-open door of my wife's room.

True, I was a husband over whom twelve months had rolled, but no lover in the ardour and zenith of his first passion could have experienced the feelings that lived within me.

Nervous trepidation knocked loudly at my heart, my soul was sick with longing to look upon her once again, my brow burnt with the hot flush of anxiety to find her well and happy as when I had seen her last.

Eve stood near her mirror, her pure profile only reflected; and under the strong light from one of the windows the too faithful glass showed up to my awe-struck gaze a face so changed that I grew mad and dizzy as I looked.

Her hair fell as of yore in long light masses over her shoulders. She wore a snowy flowing dress, like the one I had seen her in on the first evening of our

meeting, and her favourite necklet of pearls fell upon her bosom.

Her eyes had a rapt far-off expression in them, and a strange mournful little smile hovered on the corners of her mouth; and she was white, *so* white, with an awful unearthly pallor that spread from brow to neck.

I could not look longer; I knew in that moment quite as surely as though the curtain of eternity had been suddenly lifted up before my eyes, that an unseen hand was drawing her away, up, up into realms where I could not reach her.

With a bound I was by her side, holding her to me in maniacal frenzy and terror.

A cry of gladness issued from her lips, and the colour mantled over her face as, clasping my hands in hers, she lifted up to me her bright dancing eyes.

The next moment she fell forward against my breast, and looking down I saw—oh God!—great crimson drops oozing, oozing slowly, sluggishly from my wife's pale lips. I saw Eve's life-blood staining her snow-white dress. No more! no more! The faintness of death came over me, and with my wife still in my arms I fell into unconsciousness.

PART V.

In the west, clad in crimson and gold, the sun was slowly descending behind a fleecy cloud. The lambent air blew gently in through the open casement, and fanned my wife's pale brow. She lay for a long, long while silent, and her eyes, larger than ever in their deep setting of bistre shade, gazed upwards at the clear blue sky.

A longing, powerful and uncontrollable, came over me to hear her speak. But for some time I dared not break in upon her waking reverie; for as she lay with pained lips and dreamy look, I thought she was holding converse with invisible beings, between whom and me a great gulf intervened.

At last I could refrain no longer, my ears seemed aching for her low sweet voice to come again; so almost unconsciously I repeated Helen Carden's words—

I knew them by heart. Had they not been said when I first looked on my darling's face?

"Dreaming. Eve! always dreaming the hours away! What in the world can you find to dream about?"

She turned to me with an angel smile, and whispered faintly, "I remember, Gerald; Helen said that the day we met—when you saved Harry, and won my heart! But oh, Gerald, my own husband, my dreams are sadly altered since then. My soul can no longer throw off its mortal coils, and soar up into other regions; for I love the earth, for it holds *you*, Gerald, and my child. Oh, Gerald, Gerald! hold me fast, *fast* in your arms! Don't, *don't* let me go!" she screamed out, and with a sudden accession of strength she threw herself off the couch into my arms.

My wife! my Eve! Her long hair fell in tangled masses over her white neck; her eyes for a minute sought mine eagerly, wildly, and her fingers laced themselves within my own firmly and passionately. Then the little hands relaxed their hold, her snowy lids drooped heavily over the sweet blue eyes. I stooped mechanically, and pressed the rosebud mouth to catch the parting breath, and laid my hand on her heart just to feel the last, last throb it gave. Then I

laid her quietly down, for I knew that the blue eyes would never greet my coming again, or the red lips smile on my face. There was no violence in my grief; but a few days later, when I buried my dead wife, I buried my dead happiness in the same grave.

* * * *

Right away in a quiet suburb of the great metropolis, away from the din and trouble of human life, a rustic cemetery lies at the end of a broad road that is fringed on either side by ancient trees; a churchyard peaceful and pleasant, planted carefully by loving hands, and tended by sorrowing hearts. The long green grass nods and waves its feathery heads above each grave at the slightest breath of the summer wind, and flowers bloom and blush under the flickering light and shade of graceful willows, that bend low, as though to kiss the still white faces lying at their feet.

In a secluded corner, railed in, and with soft masses of moss and thick tufts of violets clinging to its base, a white tablet stands surmounted by a tiny cross, and upon it are these words:

In hoc signo spes mea!

Sacred to the Memory of Eve Dering,

Aged 18.

This is where my darling sleeps—sleeps calmly all through the warm bright summer hours, and the sweet evening gloaming; sleeps with the soft moonlight forming quaint arabesques over her little grave; and through the dull dark wintry days, deaf to the howling of the dreary blast, to the gay lullaby of the blithesome birds, to the sound of my passionate grieving!



LA GITANA.

PART I.



IT was a very bleak and desolate-looking common, with the brightness of mid-summer suns pouring down hot beams upon it. Not a vestige of grateful foliage nor a cool glint of water was within sight, and the only produce of the arid soil consisted of some withered and dwarfish bushes of the yellow furze, diversified with stinging nettles and scanty patches of sickly grass, upon which a few cattle slothfully grazed. Beasts so wondrously poor and lean, that they appeared barely equal to the arduous task of nibbling the dry and scorched blades that formed their most uninviting meal.

Yet, strange to say, human beings had voluntarily chosen dreary and lonely Thornleigh Heath for a temporary abiding-place. True, they were not folks to be over-fastidious as to comfort and requirements, for they were only a tribe of gipsies, composed of men and women of various nations, who presented for the most part not only an unpleasant, but even a formidable, aspect to the eye. Savage and swarthy, uncouth in gesture, loud in gesticulation, and principally vagabonds and thieves, they had been tracked

for their petty larcenies by the myrmidons of the law, and unearthed like foxes from hole to hole, seeking rest and finding none, for many long and weary leagues. On the isolated and dreary common they found themselves free from molestation for a while, and were enabled to take a fill of idleness, which, to their indolent natures, was in itself the perfection of luxury.

The small and dingy tents were pitched *pêle-mêle* here and there, in close contiguity, and the huge unwieldy caravans were drawn together, so as to form some slight shelter from the burning rays.

Just where the coolest shadows slanted down upon a gaudy parti-coloured shawl that was carefully spread out upon the ground, reclined the head of the tribe. She was a native of Toledo, and in the palmy days of youth she had probably been the peerless belle of its famous Alcazar. Considerably past the half of a century, and far above the average height of her sex, she presented a very masculine appearance, with big sinewy limbs, that the tucked-up sleeves of the bodice, and the short embroidered kirtle she wore, fully displayed to view.

From beneath the artistically arranged folds of a picturesque scarlet kerchief, tresses as jetty as the wing of the blackcock, fell in dishevelled and rough masses round a broad and deeply-tanned face, that was indisputably coarse and bold in expression, but which yet owned a set of features as regular and grand as some Roman matron's.

Heavy bangles of gilt clasped her dusky wrists, and large crescents of the same ornamented her ears, while curious amulets engraved with barbarous-looking hieroglyphics were suspended round her ample neck.

By her side stood a tall pitcher or vase of earthenware, full of a kind of sherbet, which she raised frequently and with the same facility to her lips as if it had been but a featherweight.

From her lowly couch she watched covertly and severely, with eyes that were as black as sloes and as keen as a hawk's, the groups of her tawny progeny, who lay about lazily on the encamping ground; the male portion of the community with long clay pipes in mouth, and the women in their fantastic but soiled finery, flitting about and laughing and jabbering in Babel-like confusion of tongues.

The afternoon was waning slowly but surely, and losing all patience—a virtue which she did not possess at any time to an eminent degree—the gipsy mother spoke out in a loud guttural voice, that especially in wrath sounded as harsh and as hard as the croaking of an ancient raven—

“Five o'clock by the sun, and I'll be sworn night-fall will soon be upon us; and it has quite escaped your memories, forsooth, that our larder lies empty, that not so much as the half of a widgeon's wing will grace our evening meal. Sebastian, Gomez, all of you fellows, in lieu of sprawling there like so many lay figures, get hence and ensnare a rabbit or a pullet. Drones, be quick, I say!” And in order to enforce her regal command, she waved imperiously a large muscular hand, while her accents waxed shriller and shriller. The men she addressed scowled fiercely at her under their dark beetling brows, but never attempted to move a jot from their recumbent positions.

“The sun is too hot to do your bidding, mother. If you desire the larder to be replenished, you will have to catch the game yourself,” replied with an

insolent laugh a morose-visaged gipsy whom she had called Sebastian.

He was a Portuguese, with the worst and lowest type of his country impressed on his features, the look of which was not by any means improved by a deep and suspicious brand upon his narrow and receding forehead, and which was a small donation he had received on entering the *travaux forcés*. What with his low stature, his slouching and shuffling gait, and his hang-dog expression, he bore as fit an aspect for *gibier de potence* as could possibly be met with.

"Or if it pleases your majesty to take your case, bid La Gitana go and sing to the town gentry hard by. With her pretty wiles and coy glances she could bring us back enough silver to buy a dozen evening meals if she willed it, I'll warrant; but, by Santa Maria, the young girl has grown mightily dainty of late, and *we* are not good enough for her smiles and looks," he added with a sneer, and a knowing wink of his cunning eye at a man who sat near him, and whose exterior was far cleaner and more civilized than all the rest of the motley company. His name was Ruperto, and he was a Spaniard, with the clear olive tint of his nation, and with a majestic and athletic figure that might have stood as a model for a youthful Hercules. His eyes were extremely bright and intelligent, and long glossy hair waved over his stalwart shoulders. Arrayed in a curiously-fashioned garb, that savoured partly of a Royalist cavalier's, and partly of Robin Hood's, he was a very handsome specimen of his race. As Sebastian's innuendos fell upon his ear, his dark orbs flashed fire, the red blood rushed into his cheek, a heavy cloud passed over his brow, and there was an ominous glitter in his glance.

He was a kinsman and a prime favourite of the "mother;" and presuming on his consanguinity and place in her affections, he always spoke out his will imperatively, when by force of mere habit, rather than from any feelings of friendliness or obedience, the other gipsies succumbed as a rule meekly to her control.

"And, by fierce Phœbus above, no weak woman shall do the work to save these hard and lusty fellows trouble. Come, rouse up, all of ye, and let us be-gone ere famished stomachs make your tempers hotter. Listen to me, good mother. La Gitana shall not be forced to sing and dance in these sultry hours, while so many strong arms are here to gain the cheer. Why should we tempt the cruel falcon with the dove, or drive the milk-white lamb right into the fold of the ravening wolves?" he asked angrily, stamping his heel.

"But where *is* La Gitana?" he added, in a wondrously softer tone, as he looked anxiously round the caravans and tents in search of the subject of conversation, but returned disappointed and crestfallen in a minute or so to his seat.

"Where, indeed?" jeered Seoastian in an evil voice, that was full of mockery and malice, but which was greeted by all the group with noisy and undisguised hilarity.

Truly the poor Gitana was no object of love to most of her tribe, judging by the strong leaning to Sebastian's side in the matter in question.

Ruperto frowned as the unpalatable merriment rang out, and jumping quickly to his feet, he faced Sebastian with concentrated defiance and determination inscribed so legibly on his mouth, that the other

man's face blanched suddenly to a strange and leaden whiteness.

Like most bullies and braggarts, Sebastian was a thorough craven at heart, and he trembled like an aspen-leaf inwardly at the very unmistakable signs of wrath on his adversary's countenance.

"Where is she?" thundered Ruperto in a stentorian voice, that might have awakened the Seven Sleepers, and which startled all its listeners, while his fists appeared to Sebastian to take up a dangerous and most unpleasant vicinity.

He hesitated for a moment or so, mentally considering what manner of reply would be the safest to make to the evidently exasperated questioner; and then, on the principle that "a soft answer turneth away wrath," he said in low and whining tones, while his whole frame seemed to collapse with fear—

"In truth I know not where she is, Ruperto. By the Virgen Maria, I do not. How should I know, when, as all here are aware, I have never moved from this spot since cockcrow?"

Yet even when he persisted in his denial, a malicious twinkle in his eyes entirely denied his assertion; and Ruperto, chafing and fuming with rage and incipient jealousy, seized him by the ear, and shook him in his powerful grasp as easily as if he had been an infant; then throwing him down on his knees, he kept him there forcibly, while the culprit, without a struggle, resigned himself to his fate.

"Speak the truth, knave," Ruperto shouted, "or by the soul of my dead father, I will murder thee! None shall dare to soil the plumage of my pretty bird, my Gitanella, my Rosa Silvestre, while I live to thrust back the foul slander down their throats.

Tell me at once what thou meanest, or I will wring thy wretched neck, and still the pulses of thy black heart for ever!"

"Take off thy hands—*Dios mio*, they clutch like an iron vice!—and I'll tell thee all I know," he pleaded piteously.

Ruperto unloosed his hold, and folding his brawny arms tightly across his chest, as if to prepare himself to listen calmly, but in reality to press down the rapid throbs that his jealous feelings had excited fronted him; while all the gipsies, rising simultaneously from their indolent positions, gathered around, including the mother, whom curiosity in the forthcoming recital had aroused from her turfy couch.

"Your pretty bird, Ruperto, has left her nest to perch on distant trees, and she has found another mate, I ween."

The narrator chuckled glibly, throwing a triumphant look at him whom he addressed.

"Leave alone riddling, and speak out plainly and boldly, Sebastian," vociferated the eager audience in one breath; while Ruperto's cheek grew whiter and whiter, and the thick moustache that shaded his lip failed entirely to conceal the pained quiver of his mouth.

"On yester-eve I wandered through the lanes that skirt the town hard by. Up in the sky the big moon sailed; but she was as coy as a maiden, and now and then she drew a dark veil over her face. I walked along with a slow and lingering gait, not searching for pale blossoms or golden-eyed buds peeping out of their green coverlid of leaves, but for some errant pullet that might have wandered from its roost, an unwary perch in the wayside pool, or even a sparrow

or two to add to the good mother's pie. I crept noiselessly on by thicket and hedge, holding my breath so as not to frighten away my game. Then suddenly I heard a gentle little rustling where the long grass nods its tall and feathery head. I bent lower, and peered through the young branches of a blackthorn, and I saw—neither a pullet nor a sparrow, but——”

“What?” exclaimed a dozen voices, while Ruperto in silence staggered towards a caravan, and leant up heavily against its side.

“Ruperto's pretty dove La Gitana nestling close and loving beneath a falcon's wing—the milk-white lamb in the fold of a ravening wolf. Ay, there stood Rosa Silvestre, so cold and so proud to all her tawny race; so fond, so gentle, and so meek to the fair-haired stranger, with eyes as blue as the heavens are now, with a mien as stately and haughty as a noble hidalgo of Spain. I listened to the voices that kept murmuring on softly, like the waters of the broad Guadalquiver, and I heard——”

“*Misericordia!*” ejaculated Ruperto faintly, with big drops of cold perspiration starting upon his pallid brow, while his strong hands clung more tightly to the wheel which was his support.

“La Gitana coo so sweetly to her mate that she hated the gipsy blood with bitterest rancour, and loved but him in all the world!”

“*Grandes cielos!* the traitress! the serpent!” exclaimed the hearers in a voice.

But Ruperto, without uttering a syllable, seized his fowling-piece, and shouldering it, strode hastily towards the town, that lay about half a league from the heath.

“Thanks to thy meddling talk, Sebastian, the

demon of mischief is brewing in that brain," said the mother angrily, as she pointed towards the retreating figure of her kinsman. "Run after him, one of you and see that no harm come of the tale-bearing," she added, persuasively.

"I will go, mother," answered a young English gipsy with a blooming Hebe-like face.

She was dressed as a little Red Riding-hood, and had glittering coins interwoven in her glossy plaits of hair. Her eyes had been employed during the whole conversation in watching the expression of Rupert's countenance, and were turned wistfully and regretfully still towards the direction he had taken.

"I heard them say that a great fair would be held in the market-square to-day, so I finished these for sale.

And she pointed to a heap of quaint-shaped basket manufactured with wonderful taste and adroitness from the common water-flags, and stained with the crimson juice of wild berries.

"The fair is not held till to-morrow at noon-day, Hilda; so thine excuse falls to the ground," laughed and jeered some of the party, while the girl blushed like a peony over brow and neck at her subterfuge being discovered.

Ruperto was very dear to her heart, and consciousness of her feelings imparted a curious awkwardness to her usually bold manner.

"See how the red blood mounts in her cheek! Why not confess, girl, that thy footsteps go after Ruperto as naturally as the sparks fly upward?"

"It matters little what the wagging tongues say of thee, Hilda; mind my bidding, and see that Ruperto's neck runs not into danger," desired the mother in an authoritative tone.



Hilda, eager to obey, lingered no longer; but leaving all her baskets on the grass, she sped, swift and light of foot as a mountain chamois, over the common, until she arrived within a short distance of the object of her anxiety. Then she tripped noiselessly along behind him; while Ruperto, entirely absorbed in his own fears and unhappiness, never dreamed even of her proximity.

He walked with giant strides on and on, never pausing until he reached the outskirts of the little town; then, after a momentary hesitation, he turned down a long and narrow lane.

The evening shadows were beginning to fall, and the pleasant twilight was increased by the entwining branches overhead of the trees that edged the road on either side. A high hedge ran along as well, skirting the way, rich and fragrant with honeysuckle and the yellow jasmine; and every now and then on the stillness of the lovely spot the sweet note of a bird sounded plaintively upon the ear.

But the gipsy, with a heavy cloud upon his handsome face, and evil passions warring tumultuously in his broad breast, heeded naught around him that savoured of bird or flower. His great black eyes peered curiously hither and thither into the pervading gloom, and his fingers kept clutching involuntarily and nervously at the weapon that he carried.

Suddenly he came to a dead halt, and hiding himself behind the gnarled trunk of an old oak, he watched, with the keen pangs of jealousy and with murder in his soul, two figures in his vicinity that leant over a rustic stile, engrossed in themselves and oblivious of the rest of the world.

The moon was scarcely arisen from her azure bed,

but the light of myriads of stars was quite enough to reveal to Ruperto the slight waist of the being he worshipped with the wild vehemence of gipsy nature encircled by another man's arm, while a long fair moustache drooped close against La Gitanella's raven tresses.

The sight curdled the blood in his veins, and even stunned him for a moment, as though a severe blow had been dealt him; then he seemed, as it were, to stagger into a full consciousness of the scene. Pale as ashes, even to his lips, he drew himself together as if to collect his strength; then, pointing the gun steadily, he deliberately pulled the trigger; but a quick jerk to his arm sent the deadly missile upwards. La Gitanella and her lover were safe; and Hilda, trembling and faint, clung passionately to Ruperto's breast. Looking down in undisguised amazement, he saw whose face rested so near to his own, and, with a gesture of angry impatience, hurling her violently to the ground, he stalked rapidly away. His vengeance remained unsatisfied, his heart was sorely lacerated. His pretty bird, his Gitana, was indeed another's, and yet she lived! Ay, lived to hang entranced on another's words; lived to drink honeyed draughts of love from another's eyes.

The only human being that had ever touched his feelings, and evoked all that was good and truthful and honest within him, was lost to him for ever. Leaning over the hedge he wiped away big drops from his cheeks, ashamed lest even the mute trees should be witnesses to his unmanly emotion; but even while jealousy tortured him to madness, the gipsy melted in tenderness and compassion towards the

girl that he loved infinitely better than his own existence.

Completely uneducated, unpolished as a savage, and without a spark of religion in his nature, he yet sent up a rude but earnest thanksgiving to the Supreme Deity that ruled the world, for having shielded his love from the death-stroke that his cruel hand had nearly dealt her. He shuddered as he pictured to himself *La Gitana's* graceful limbs all rigid and set, and the luminous light of her starry eyes faded for ever; her liquid voice hushed in the lonely grave; her face and heart colder than the wintry winds. Bitterly repentant of his contemplated crime, he even experienced a sentiment of gratitude to *Hilda* for having been the instrument of saving him from it; and, full of regret at his harshness towards her, he went slowly back to the spot where he had left her in his wrath.

La Gitanella and her companion had strolled farther on, startled by the sound of the shot; but the girl *Hilda* still crouched on the ground, moaning and weeping. *Ruperto* raised her up with all the gentleness he could muster, and taking one of her thick plaits of hair he wiped away with it the tears that fell like rain down her round and ruddy face.

"I was very wrong to ill-treat thee, girl," he whispered kindly and soothingly to her; "but, in truth, I was beside myself when I forgot that it was but a weak and helpless woman that stood by my side. *Hilda*, thou didst me a rare service when thy small strength stayed my hand from working direful evil, and I thank thee for it; but it would have been

far kinder of thee if thou hadst pointed the fowling-piece at my own poor heart."

And under the grateful cloak of night he let his eyes fill with water, but with a hard rough hand he dashed it quickly away.

"Art thou bruised, child?"

"Only a little shaken, Ruperto," she answered meekly, although her knees and arms were hurt in the fall. The warm gipsy blood was rife in her veins, but to this man she was as gentle and loving as a gazelle. "But even if I were hurt, what would a few paltry bruises be to the wound in my breast if thou hadst become food for the gallows?" she shivered. "Jealousy is the foulest fiend of all; I have felt his torture myself, full many a time; but let no woman tempt thee to jeopardise thine own neck. La Gitana's love is not so mighty a thing that thou shouldst desire to yield up thy life if thou lovest her, Ruperto!"

He answered not a word. To his thinking the heart of his peerless beauty was a treasure that was worth dying a hundred deaths for. Brave and bold as a lion, and with limbs like iron, he would unwaveringly have risked his life to save his Gitana, and, with the refined feeling of ancient heroes, have deemed one gentle word or kindly smile from her sweet lips ample reward for aught he suffered. But he was not of a nature to give his confidence freely to any one.

"Thou art right in thy speech, Hilda. None can gainsay that common sense sits pleasantly on thy pretty mouth. It is not for poor human creatures to take the law into their own hands, and to punish deceit and falsity by so terrible a thing as—*murder!*" His voice was hushed into a whisper as he spoke the last word, and his strong frame trembled visibly from

head to foot. It seemed to him at that moment as if a pale flickering ray from the moon, that was just appearing above a belt of clouds, brought back to view the dim glance of a pair of eyes fast glazing in death; whilst a mass of dark foliage at his feet recalled a horrible ghastly heap that he had hastily hidden away in the ruins of an old Spanish town not so very long ago.

"Yes," he continued in an absent voice, as though thought had travelled miles away and he was communing with himself, "it is an awful crime to kill. God gave us breath, and He alone should take it away. And the red blood stains for ever if the hands go near it!" he said wildly, clasping his fingers together, and nervously looking at them as he held them up close to his eyes. Then his gaze fell on the gipsy girl, whose sparkling black eyes stared at him in wonderment, while curiosity was plainly inscribed on her mobile features, and he recovered himself with an effort. "Get thee back to the tents as quickly as thy swiftest steps can take thee, Hilda. Thou art too dainty a prize for some errant jackal; and, mind thee, not a word to that knave Sebastian, or to any one else, of what both thou and I have seen in the lane this night."

"I would cut out my tongue sooner than anger thee by disobedience, Ruperto, and thou knowest it," she replied, earnestly; then, patting his arm affectionately, she disappeared in the gloom towards the common; but Ruperto, averse to meeting any of the tribe in the perturbed state of his mind, roamed restlessly hither and thither in the darkness of the spreading trees; now starting violently at the contact of some jutting bough, as though the death grip of an

Alguazil was upon him; now running at full speed from horrors that memory conjured up; and only stealing back like a thief to the encampment when all the gipsies were locked in slumber.

PART II.

PALE holy stars shedding a chastened radiance from the vaulted sky; the evening air laden with the fragrant breath of bud and blossom; the voice of Philomel upon the ear; rich drooping foliage casting cool and friendly shadows upon the earth,—these were the assistants at La Gitana's tryst of love. Even while Phœbus drove his car furiously through the heavens, and the sultry hour brought languor to man and beast, the figure of a girl might have been seen hastily wending her way from Thornleigh Heath towards the town. Bencath the broad glare of day it was easy to perceive that she bore no single mark of gipsy blood upon her.

Her face, after the well-known type of the celebrated Murillo's choicest portraits, yet owned a creamy tint that was completely free from the tawny and dusky tinge that characterized the features of her tribe. Her small head, with its long rippling tresses, was poised daintily on her swan-like neck with the hauteur of an eastern queen. Large shy eyes, like those of an antelope, were shaded by thick black lashes; and delicately-chiselled nostrils and proud curving lips lent an aristocratic beauty to her countenance. She was patrician to the backbone. In spite of the peculiarity of the gipsy garb in which her lithe form was arrayed, and the jingling tambourine with



its knot of gay-coloured ribbons that she held in a gloveless hand, the slight ankle and symmetrical arching foot, "'neath which water could flow," according to the Arabian conceit, were points that indisputably belonged to the purest of *sangre azul*.

A crimson flush was on her rounded cheek, and a happy light beamed from her dark eyes as she hurried over heather and furze, and passing through a wicket gate, sped lightly down the lane that was known by the rustics of Thornleigh as the "Lovers' Walk."

It was too early for the trysting hour; but, away from the noisy din and coarse talk of her canvas home, in the deep stillness of country, with no sound save that of fluttering leaves or murmuring water, and no witnesses but the spangled butterflies, and the flowers that blushed as brightly as herself, La Gitana was more than content to lie upon the grassy sward, under a sheltering elm, and to dream of love.

Love, fervid in its intensity as the clime of her own sweet south, but as pure in its nature as England's snows.

With the long jetty lashes kissing close the soft pink cheeks, and with scarlet pouting lips, that parted every now and then in a little smile, the gipsy girl, in a delicious waking dream, pictured herself the bride of the fair-haired Saxon, whose pedigree dated from the Conqueror, and whose rich coffers overflowed.

In imagination she knelt beside him at the altar of a grand old church, with satin and lace trailed around her, while the songs of wood-birds that sat on the boughs above her sounded like a nuptial hymn. Then she dwelt in a turreted castle, surrounded by its own ancestral trees, and filled with retainers, while she, the

poor vagrant gipsy, raised by the omnipotent power of love, was suzeraine of all.

The red sun sank lower and lower in the westward, and the grey dusk crept gently over the sky, but she lay on her couch of grass utterly heedless of time.

"Wild Rose!" whispered a familiar voice in her ear; and starting quickly to her feet, she found Keith Cameron by her side.

"Rosa Silvestre," or "Wild Rose," that was the only name she knew beside the title of *La Gitana*, that had been bestowed upon her by her tribe. She was so entirely dissimilar to them all, both in person and demeanour, that a barrier of reserve divided her from them; and notwithstanding the extreme jealousy of the women, and the ill-feeling of the men, whom she kept completely at a distance by her manner, she was enveloped in a species of mysterious grandeur by them that enforced respect in their bearing in her presence, whatever licence of speech her absence allowed them.

But it was only as a wandering gipsy, a beautiful savage, or a cunning seeress of fortunes, earning a few paltry coins by her tambourine and the liquid tones of her own voice, or by her skill in palmistry, that Keith Cameron knew her; and although bewitched by her surpassing beauty and grace, and struck by the extraordinary refinement of her language, he was, after all, but a matter-o'-fact sensible Briton, not given to weaving fairy tissues of romance, in which princesses disguised as strolling players formed a part. Nevertheless, the girl had a strong and subtle charm about her, and in spite of the prejudices of class, he had learnt to love her dearly, ay, and with a good, honest, and manly love that had raised up a tower of protection around her from the smallest word



or look that could have sullied the presence of the highest and purest dame of the Court of St. James's.

He came of a grand old stock, with noble quarterings upon their shield, and an unblemished name that had been proudly borne by many a belted Border-knight; but pride had yielded to passion, and the heart that had rested cold and untouched by patrician damsels throbbed strangely fast at the sound of tinkling bells, and his haughty eyes watched entranced while La Gitana's

"feet beneath her petticoat,
Like little mice, stole in and out,
As if they feared the light;"

while his face burnt hotly as he recollected that in loving a lowly-born maiden he was truly a recreant scion of his lordly race.

"Wild Rose!" and Keith's voice literally trembled with tenderness as he gave utterance to the pretty sobriquet, "I scarcely dared to awaken you from your slumbers. You looked so unutterably happy in them; and these sweet lips," and he stooped and kissed them fervently, "smiled up in my face as I bent over you."

"I *was* happy; for I was dreaming of thee," the girl answered, softly, in her broken English, addressing him with the familiar "tu toi" of gipsy dialect, while she lifted up her great loving eyes towards him; "*so* happy, Keith!"

He had taught her early in their acquaintance to call him by his Christian name; and in her silvery southern accents it sounded infinitely more melodious than in his own tongue.

"What were you dreaming, pretty one?" and he enfolded her with his arm, and felt immeasurably happy himself as he did so; and the green leaves

rustled gently as if they were murmuring a glad welcome to the kisses of the fickle breeze, and the pale stars above peeped at one another, veiling and unveiling the light of their glances, as if in shyness, while Wild Rose whispered her dream close in her lover's ear. Keith listened to her artless words; but if the shadow of the big elm-tree had not obscured the light, a trace of sadness might have been read upon his brow. For a moment or so he was silent, lost in painful thought; the girl's dream had brought so vividly before his mind the great incompatibility existing between their social positions. Yet to wed any other but Wild Rose never entered his brain, so completely had she entwined herself round each fibre of his heart.

"Tell me, my love bird, did you care for me more amidst the pomp of the church and the grandeur of the castle than you do here, under the canopy of the blue sky amidst the simplicity of nature?"

"I *could* not love thee more, even if I would! Thou fillest all my soul, whether green leaves or gilded roofs shelter me. Even when I die, my spirit will fain follow thee wheresoever thou goest!" and she nestled her head into his breast.

"My own!"

Neither of them spoke again for awhile, mute from sheer intensity of happiness. Only Keith gathered his Wild Rose closer to him, and gazed into her eyes.

As they stood there Ruperto's jealous eye marked them, and his hand tried to point the deadly aim.

The sound of the gun startled them out of the blissful trance into which they had both fallen, but surmising it was but the work of an errant fowler, they paid no heed, and only wandered quietly on farther into the lane.



The moon was rising out of a large white fleecy cloud, and the silver light, falling through the interlacing branches, formed a carpet of diamonds for their feet, and bathed in liquid lustre all around. The scent of new-mown hay came upon the wings of the summer wind from the adjacent meadows; not a sound but the low twitter of a sleepy bird, not a breath but that of some fragrant flower. All was peaceful and still save Keith Cameron's heart.

Looking down upon the slight figure beside him, feeling her clasp upon his arm, and realizing that he worshipped her dearer than his life, he recognised fully the utter misery of leaving her for ever; but honour and rectitude bade him do so, since, to use the allegorical phraseology of her own people, he knew that it was not possible for the eagle to mate but with his equal. Wild Rose suddenly glanced up at his face, and, with the quick perception of her nature, noted at once the unwonted sadness that clouded it.

"Art thou ill or weary, Keith?" she questioned hurriedly, with anxious solicitude in her tone. "Heaven grant that 'tis not the shadow of sorrow that lies so heavily upon thy brow; or, if perchance it be so, that my touch, like a magic wand, may drive away the weight from thine heart to mine own. I cannot bear to see thy lip without its sunny smile, that sheds both warmth and light upon my soul," she exclaimed, with pathos and passion that were infinite.

"It is nothing, dear one;" and Keith essayed bravely to thrust a throng of miserable thoughts away from him in a deep sigh. "If a shade was on my face, it was cast there by that dark cloud overhead;" and he pointed upwards.

The girl looked also, and shuddered.

"'Tis an evil omen, Keith," she faltered, with all the superstition of a gipsy. "Knowest thou not that when a black veil suddenly hides the pale face of the moon, 'tis an augury that there shall be grief to the children of the earth, on whom she loves to shed her brightest smiles?"

Keith laughed at her fancy, and kissed away the quiver on her mouth.

"Southern imaginations are more fertile than those in colder climes, pretty one; and see, the augury was a false one, for there sails Diana without a speck veiling her from our bold gaze. What prophecy does that suggest?"

"That grief shall come for awhile, but that joy will scatter its bitter blossoms to the four winds in the end."

"That means that Wild Rose and I shall never part, for without her my life would be an arid waste. But tell me a little about the gipsies, that I may learn more about yourself. What caused them to fix on so rough and uninviting a spot as Thornleigh Heath for an abiding-place? Why, it is barely good enough to harbour a dog, much less human creatures."

"They are a rough people, and it matters little to them where they pitch their tents. On Thornleigh Heath they can quarrel and fight, with none to stay their cruel hands," she replied, with a gesture of unfeigned aversion and fear.

"Are they all kind to you, my Wild Rose?"

"They do not love me, but dread of the gipsy mother restrains them from taunting and gibing. I keep aloof from all, and seldom hold converse with any of them except—Ruperto."

There was a peculiar intonation in her voice as she

spoke that aroused Keith's attention at once, while a fierce pang of jealousy thrilled through him. Seizing her hands, he scrutinized the expression of her features.

"Ruperto! And what is he like, Wild Rose, that he should have your notice more than the rest?"

"I know not; it never came into my mind to study his face. I only know that he is not like thee!"

She answered frankly, with undisguised admiration in her eyes, as she surveyed her companion under the bright moon's rays.

And in truth, Keith Cameron, as he stood beside her, with his fair hair gleaming up like gold, his perfect features and athletic form would have presented the aspect of a Greek god to other eyes beside those of a loving girl.

The proud red blood mantled in his cheek, and drawing up his head imperiously, he said in cold curt accents, annoyed that such a comparison should have even suggested itself to her—

"Ruperto is *only* a miserable gipsy!"

"And I am *only* a gipsy," she murmured, very mournfully and humbly, while large tears rained down her face.

"Rather my queen, my empress!" cried Keith, deeply regretting his hasty words.

For the world he would not have wounded her feelings. There was a little pause, during which he strove to bring back a smile to her lips.

"Does this Ruperto ever presume to tell you that he loves you?" he questioned, unquiet and full of suspicions still.

"Yes," she whispered, very low and bashfully, as though she were ashamed to own to it, and he felt her shudder all over. "He follows me from spot to spot

with his eyes, and he says that it is the will of the gipsy mother that I should mate with him—that none of the tribe dare gainsay her words; but sooner than obey, I would pierce my heart with this!” and she drew from her bosom a small but sharp stiletto, and showed him its glittering blade. “I carry this with me always, but no blood but mine own will ever stain its brightness.”

“And how long have you been with these gipsies, sweet one?”

“Since earliest memory. When we were in Spain, I was never let to wander alone. In Seville and Toledo, where we pitched our tents the longest, the white walls were my prison-bars. But since we came over the sea, they force me to play and sing, and tell fortunes; but the silver pieces that cross my palm seem to burn holes into it!”

And she stamped her little foot impatiently upon the ground, while her red lip curled scornfully. Only for a moment, for her nature was pliable and gentle as a dove’s, although warmth of feeling was her birthright.

Keith pondered over her words, and wondered why the tribe should have kept her in seclusion in Spain, where her peerless loveliness would infallibly have attracted notice from the gay nobles, and gained the money that the avaricious gipsy character clung to so passionately. The thought that the girl, with her patrician beauty, was no gipsy after all, but the child of an aristocrat, stolen and hidden away, flashed into his mind; but it was only a passing one, with nothing in the story she had told him of her life to substantiate it.

“The night grows on, and I must haste away, or they may perchance seek me, Keith. Hush! what



sound was that?" she exclaimed in alarm, as a sudden rustling in a fallen heap of leaves that lay on the other side of the thick hedge fell upon their ears, and the dark form of a woman glided quickly away in the distance under the gloom of the trees.

"*Santa madre!* it is the gipsy Hilda who hath been eavesdropping here," she added, trembling violently. "They have tracked me, Keith, and I may perchance never look on thee again, my love! my love! they will take me hence, and place land and water 'twixt thee and me. I knew that black cloud boded ill. Keith, without thee my heart will break!"

"Keep up a brave spirit, and trust that all may go well," he said, soothingly. "To-morrow night I shall be here, longing to fold you again in these arms. Good-night, and angels watch over thee, my life!"

"Farewell," she murmured upon his lips; "and would that the blessed morrow was already come!"

There was no need for the Gitana to dread anger or reproaches from her tribe on the discovery of her trysting with the fair-haired stranger. Even Ruperto, whatever ill-feeling was in his breast, although he cast ever and anon wistful glances towards her, refrained from the utterance of a taunting word.

When Wild Rose, after a sleepless night, had awakened from a short slumber, the sun was high up in the heavens, and it seemed to her as though an unwonted air of excitement prevailed over the whole encampment; but wrapt up in her own feelings, and counting the hours as they passed until she should find Keith by her side, she never noticed the stir around.

Early in the morning a gipsy from Seville had

reached the camp, with important news that was solely for the ear of the gipsy mother. After a lengthened interview with her, a grave consultation was held among the elders of the party; and when it was ended, the heterogeneous paraphernalia was hurriedly packed, ready for departure at the shortest notice.

Keith Cameron kept his promised word, and lingered long beneath the spreading trees, with his cheek flushing at every sound, and his heart swelling with impatience to see his love again; but he lingered at the sweet trysting spot in vain. The moon rose higher and higher, and flooded the earth with her splendour; but the only light that he yearned for—the light of *La Gitana's* eyes—was denied him.

At length, with dire misgiving in his breast, and disappointment paling his face, he strode hastily towards the common. Thornleigh Heath lay in the moonlight lonely and bleak. Here and there a smouldering fire betokened a late meal; but the white tents of the gipsies no longer met the sight, and even while Keith, sick with unhappiness and despair, stared round in dismay, his poor Wild Rose, vigilantly guarded by Ruperto, wept broken-hearted in a corner of a crowded caravan.

PART III.

Two years had passed away, although in their course Time had lagged wearily and heavily on his wings, since the summer's night when Cameron stood upon the deserted common, and realized the bitter fact that Wild Rose was indeed gone from him. All the efforts he had made—and they had in nowise lacked energy, for his very heart was in the task—had proved futile

to track the gipsies; and in truth, while he was searching for them northwards, they had travelled in double haste in the opposite direction.

Absence, instead of cooling the ardour of his passion, appeared to increase it tenfold, and La Gitana's beauty and soft "antelopean" eyes haunted him day and night. At length, utterly unable to cope against a feeling that became daily stronger than himself, and finding neither rest nor peace in the old pleasures and pursuits of home life, he resolved to try if existence would present brighter colours in new countries, and change of scene distract him from the one all-absorbing subject of regret. From city to city he went, listlessly and aimlessly, like the Wandering Jew, each one interesting him less than the last; and after several months of absence from England, he found himself located for the winter season at Algiers.

But even in that town, notwithstanding the manifold *agrémens* of delicious climate, enchanting scenery, and profusion of fruits and flowers, the social circles, that were composed principally of French refugees and broken-down Portuguese and Spanish merchants, were distasteful in the highest degree to the fastidious eye and taste of the thoroughbred Englishman, who had lived nearly all his life amongst *la crème de la crème* of Belgravia and Mayfair; while the second-rate fondas and casinos were most uninviting after his haunts in Pall-mall.

The only sight in Algiers that at all attracted or interested him was the extremely fantastic attire of the Algerian women, bringing vividly to his mind the figure of the gipsy girl whom he so vainly strove to forget. But the more he essayed to drown her memory in Lethe's stream, the more pertinaciously

his soul seemed to cling to that soft silent night, when, under the chastened light of myriad stars, he had clasped his Wild Rose to his breast for the very last time.

Travel proved no panacea for his trouble, and he commenced his route homewards, lingering on his steps in the pleasant south. It was in the beginning of spring, when Nature wears usually her vernal garb; but the warmth of the clime had matured each blossom into summer luxuriance and beauty, and the sun, out of a shadowless sky, sent down his beams with true tropical fervour.

Keith rested at Toledo, not from any especial attraction that the town had for him, but simply because La Gitana had mentioned it as her abode for awhile, and because it was a known spot for gipsies to congregate; and for hours, in defiance of the sultry atmosphere, he paraded the streets and visited the several ruins in the suburbs, with the hope animating him that perchance he might alight on a trace of his lost love.

No vestige of her or of her people, however, appeared, to reward his longing eyes and indefatigable research; and, weary and heart-sick, he went to Seville, and established himself for some days in the Plaza Nuova. It was just at the termination of the Holy Week when he reached the city; the celebrated "Santa Semana," and the great fair of the place, with the attendant attraction of a famous bull-fight, was in prospect.

The grand gala occasion seemed to present to Keith's mind a certainty almost of falling on some of the tribe whom he had learnt to know by sight at Thornleigh, and he was aware that a handful of reals



would prove an all-sufficient bait for any information he desired to extract.

The proud and handsome Englishman, with hair that looked like gold in the sunlight, and whose symmetrical form rivalled the statue of the young Apollo which was one of the principal ornaments of the place, was naturally an object of attention to the coquettish black-eyed donnas, and he evoked a considerable amount of malice and jealousy in them by the apparent bad taste and eccentricity that induced him to rest indifferent to their charms, while he addressed any stray gipsies he encountered, and who were looked upon by the better classes of Seville as mere scum of the earth. But Keith, callous to censure, lost no opportunities of following short-kirtled women and tawny-cheeked men, were they tramps or vagabonds, so long as they flourished jingling tambourines, or unblushingly swore to fictitious fortunes; while his pulse beat high and his face flushed at the bare possibility of finding the clue he sought.

He had made a point, wherever he went, of eschewing all refined society, fearing lest its claims might interfere with the one object he had in view; and it was only on the eve of his departure that a brother countryman suggested the wisdom of taking just a *coup d'œil* of the *grandeos* of the land that were to be collected together at a superb entertainment at the castle of the Duc d'Alicante.

The D'Alicantes were one of the wealthiest and noblest families of Spain, and the festive event was given in celebration of the *début* into the *grand monde* of the sole child and heiress, the Donna Zanella, whose peerless beauty was the theme of all Seville. Keith, loth to mix in a gay and glittering scene, with

which his feelings were not at all in consonance, was in no haste to find himself amongst the crowd. On the point of quitting Spain, it seemed to him as if he were parting with every chance of looking again upon Wild Rose.

When he reached the castle, that was situated some leagues from Seville, it was considerably past midnight, but the revelry appeared at its highest; and desirous of quiet, he stood a little apart from the dancers, leaning against a marble pillar, the hue of which was not whiter than his own cheek. He looked ill and wan, and he felt dizzy from the dazzling glare of hundreds of lamps of every colour that hung from the vaulted ceiling, and from the strong fragrance of the tuberose and orange flowers, with which the atmosphere was laden almost to stifling.

His eyes glanced carelessly and indifferently at the mass of magnificent Spanish beauties, smiling behind the gorgeous ebon-and-gold fans that they flirted with a coquetry that is indigenous to Spain.

But with the wild grace and exquisite features of his gipsy girl filling Keith's soul, all other women appeared insipid to his eyes.

The queen of the festival, the Donna Zanella, saw him as he stood there white and motionless as a statue, with a cold gaze that none had power to kindle into admiration, and a brow that bore an impress of sorrow upon it.

And as she watched him, her heart, beneath the priceless satin and lace, throbbed fast and passionately, and her hand, that rested lightly on the arm of a stately hidalgo, shook like an aspen leaf.

Never removing her eyes from the Englishman's face, as though she were enchained by a basilisk's

power, she drew her unconscious cavalier slowly towards the spot where Keith stood, while the satin-like silver sheen glittered in waves around her slight form, and the jewels in her hair and upon her bosom sparkled and scintillated under the lamps.

Keith looked up suddenly, and started forward breathless, his eyes dilating, and the hot blood suffusing his face; then he stopped still, sick with disappointment.

There before him surely **was** his long-sought love, yet it **was** not her; real, yet so unreal.

It was the well-remembered face of La Gitana, but grown far colder and prouder in expression.

There were the large and liquid eyes into whose tender depths he had gazed full many a time, but turned away either in shyness or in hauteur, so that he could not possibly catch their glance.

There were the same rippling blue-black tresses, **that** his lips and the soft west wind alone had kissed, **but** crowned with rare imperial gems, such as he knew **full** well that his gipsy girl could never own.

The Donna Zanella bore his scrutiny bravely and **unflinchingly**, even though she felt his glance was **upon** her, save that the broad lids drooped over her **dark** eyes all the while; but when, after a few **moments'** hesitation, he turned away, heartsore and **convinced** that he had been but the dupe of a **miraculous** resemblance only, all the soft pink bloom **faded** out of her cheek, and the thick jetty lashes **concealed** large glistening tears.

Indifferent, or rather reckless, of aught that the grandee by her side would think of her strange conduct, she glided from him without a word, and followed slowly in Keith's wake through lighted saloons and

darkened corridors; and as he crossed the threshold of the principal portal that led from the castle into the grounds, she gained his side, and let fall a flower she held at his feet.

He stooped mechanically, without glancing towards her, and raised the blossom from the earth.

"'Tis but a humble wild rose, not worthy of thy trouble or notice," a voice whispered softly into his ear.

For the second time in the short space of a few minutes Keith started as if he had been shot, but this time his arms caught the Donna Zanella in a close embrace. Out of the ducal walls, through the moonlit paths, until the shade of a giant magnolia was reached; then the girl's long tresses rippled upon his breast, and her scarlet lips trembled beneath the fervent pressure of his own.

"My love, my love! I scarcely thought to look upon thee again; but my heart has ever been true to thee," she murmured, tenderly. "And thou, Keith? has cruel time blunted thy feelings? dost thou care for me still?"

"Each moment of my life, since I lost you, your face has been beside me, your voice upon my ear. If I had not found you, I should have gone mad with grief, my sweet Wild Rose."

They rested, hand in hand, upon a rustic seat beneath their scented canopy; and the girl leant her head upon his heart with the child-like unreserve of the olden time, while in the semi-darkness the jewels she wore gleamed before Keith's eyes like a starry diadem on an angel's brow. Mute with love and joy, they were content to sit side by side, trying to realize that fate had indeed united them; and

every now and then Keith drew her nearer to him, as if fearful that she would elude his grasp again.

"And how came you here, sweet one?" he asked at length, awakening to a sense of their position from the beatific dream of the past moments.

"Because the Duc d'Alicante is my father, and this is my home," she answered shyly.

She felt no pride in avowing the change in her position. Her faith in her lover was so infinite, that she knew that nothing could take away his heart from her but death. Keith uttered a faint exclamation of surprise.

"Then you are the Donna Zanella, the beauty of Seville, to win whom all the Spanish nobles are ready to sacrifice life and limb?" he questioned hastily.

"I am Zanella to all the world, but only Wild Rose to thee. If the change in my name brings a change in thy heart, let me be the poor gipsy again. Without thy love, what would be wealth and name?" she said, with quivering lips and humid eyes, that looked up wistfully, as if to read her fiat of joy or woe in his face.

For all answer he kissed her again and again as he had been wont to do in their trysts in the English lane; and utterly content, she nestled into his arms like a bird.

"List to me, Keith, while I recount to thee the history of my life. Sixteen years ago, when chasing a gorgeous butterfly, I strayed beyond these domains. The gipsy mother stole me, trusting to receive a heavy ransom for me; but before my parents could trace my hiding-place, Ruperto shed the blood of an Alguazil, and, open to the vengeance of the government, the whole of his tribe were forced to flee the land.

"The day after that on which I looked upon thy dear face for the very last time, tidings reached the mother that my only brother had been drowned, and that the poor Rosa Silvestre had become heiress of the house D'Alicante. With the certainty of heavy dollars before them they hurried back to Spain, and restored me to my home; but though the tribe had hoped by long absence to escape all notice on their return, the officials traced them out, and Ruperto—she stopped a moment and shuddered—"expiated with life the crime of killing the Alguazil.

"For the two years that have passed since we parted I was placed in the convent of the Buena Madre, the white walls of which we can see to the left, on those wooded heights, peeping through the dusk. But in all these weary days thou hast never quitted my thoughts. Thy sunny smile has lingered on my memory, and come to cheer me in my lonely hours thy dear eyes have been bright beacon-stars, bidding me hope that I might see thee once again."

"My own Wild Rose!"

The bells pealed from the belfry of the ancient church, and bonfires blazed around, for the heir of Castlemaine had brought home his wife, and Keith Cameron's handsome face glowed with happiness, as, standing on the threshold of his grand old mansion, he acknowledged the shouts of his tenantry.

Later, when all around was peaceful and still, and the fair domains and the patriarchal woods of stately Castlemaine were tinged with the rosy beams of the departing sun, Keith bent over a face that lay upon his shoulder, and said—

"Do you care for me more, Wild Rose, here in the

grand castle of your dream, than you did in the quiet country lane?"

She looked up at him with the light of love filling her large dark eyes, and flinging her arms round his neck, she drew down his lips till they rested upon her own.

"I could not care for thee more, even if I would. Thou fillest all my soul, whether green leaves or gilded roofs shelter me; and when I die, bury me in some spot where thy dear foot shall tread, so that even in death I may not utterly lose thee!"





FRAGMENTS OF A BROKEN LIFE.

PART I.



DULL dark winter's day. No single streak of light can be traced across the horizon ; the heavy clouds overhang the earth like a gigantic funeral pall. The bleak blast moans a melancholy dirge, and makes the cypress-trees in the village churchyard wave and nod their heads like the ebon plumes of a hearse ; one or two shrivelled yellow leaves, the lonely waifs that autumn has left behind upon the weird-like gaunt-armed branches, rustle with a dreary sound against the cottage casement, a fit accompaniment to my thoughts as I sit here brooding, brooding for ever on the past—the bright and glorious past—that was filled by those whose “memories” are now my “all” on earth.

A mournful retrospect indeed ! Visions unutterably sad rise up, one by one, before me, of a golden dream that vanished, leaving years of ceaseless regret ; yet my heart dwells lingeringly on them, for the *present* is but a blank, and the *future*—but there is no future for me in *this* world ; only a short period of probation, during which, striving earnestly to cast off from my spirit all that is of the earth “earthly,”

and humbly hoping to reach purification by the fierce furnace of affliction through which my soul has passed, I wait patiently—ay, patiently—but wearily for that hour when I too may find my appointed place amongst the white-robed angels above, near *them* who are not dead to me, but only gone before.

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Oh, what a tell-tale mirror is that which hangs opposite to me, revealing with such truthfulness each minute ravage that grief has imprinted on these poor features!—a passionless, colourless face; a brow furrowed and snow-crowned; eyes whose pristine light has been dimmed by many and many a tear; lips that have utterly forgotten how to smile.

Who would be credulous enough to believe that only ten years ago my glance was full of gladness, my silvered hair a lustrous brown, my pallid cheeks rounded as a Hebe's, and tinted with the brightest wild-rose bloom?

I was the only child of my mother, and “she was a widow.” My father died when I was barely six years old; but I have still a vivid recollection of a dark and manly countenance bending fondly over my tiny cot, of a moustachioed lip I used to try and reach, of a pair of Herculean shoulders on which I often rode, as proudly as though Bucephalus had been my champion steed. I remember that after his death my mother never *really* laughed again, though a gentle smile would occasionally flit across her fair and placid face, and she never cast aside the “habilliments of woe,” for they were, in truth, no mockery of mourning, but the “outward and visible signs” of an inward and poignant grief.

Years passed on, and she and I lived still in the dear old home where I had first seen the light; the home which I would not have cared to exchange for the finest feudal castle in the world, as I sat within our cottage porch, with the long clinging tendrils and deep-blended hues of the passion-flower forming a rich framework for my head. Before me lay an emerald slope, round which the roses sighed sweetly at each other, rebuked in low plaintive murmurings by the soft wind and the fluttering leaves.

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My seventeenth birthday was the day on which I first saw Frank Lennox.

My fingers are trembling as I trace that name, although I spell it letter by letter, day by day, on the white headstone that the sun and the moon light up in the churchyard that lies across the road—a name engraved indelibly on my heart, but never issuing from my pale lips; for there is a desperate sorrow that knows *no* outlet, that feeds incessantly on itself, and cannot be starved out of memory, that craves no sympathy, that seeks no oblivion. It would be an infidelity to *him*, a dire desecration of “love,” if even a desire for forgetfulness crept into my aching breast.

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After a while Frank Lennox came oftener to our house, and with his presence a gladness entered into my life that it had never known before.

When the evening shadows were slanting across the narrow pathway that led up from the garden-gate, and the flowery screen of the purple blossoms hid us quite from view; when a stillness pervaded the scented air, and there were no witnesses nigh but one or two tiny

twinkling stars that peeped down upon mortals' loves ; an arm was thrown around me that drew me close to a throbbing breast, and a voice whispered softly in my ear, " Evelyn, will you be my wife ?"

Ah, what answer could I make him ! Would any words have adequately expressed how utterly I was his ? Ten long years ago now, and yet I can hear again distinctly the sigh he gave, the sigh of perfect content, when he *felt* on my warm lips the answer that I failed to speak.

My mother gave her blessing, and then we had nothing but happiness before us to the very end of our days.

* * * *

Happiness ! Merciful God, what short-sighted creatures we are ! Just for a little while a gleam of sunshine pours down its effulgence upon this dreary earth, to be suddenly hidden by heavy clouds, and its very remembrance washed away by a deluge of rain.

How often is one tiny spark of joy quenched by the copious showers of tears that are wrung from a stricken soul !

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My first real grief was my mother's death. She died six months after my marriage, peacefully, painlessly, with calm resignation to her doom, with no terror of death before her eyes.

" Frank, take care of her !" " Evelyn, love him, and be true to him always !" were her last words, and then her head fell back on the pillow, and her pure spirit passed away to join that *other* spirit that had gone before.

Whilst I sobbed by her rigid form and kissed again

and again her lifeless hand, Frank gently and reverently closed the sweet mild eyes; then, lifting me like a child, he carried me into another room. No word of comfort fell from his lips, but a fervent pressure to his heart, and the look that met my own, were enough: they told me that I was not unloved, alone, though she had left me for ever.

PART II.

Four years of married life that brought with them unspeakable bliss. Frank was so good to me, so tender and so true; ever the same in sunshine and in shade: no coldness found a place within his breast; no cloud ever rested upon his brow; no harsh word had marred the perfect harmony of our love; no bitter look had come to darken the brightness of our lives, and a child had been given us that brought twofold happiness. What pen could portray my joy when my little one, with his father's laughing eyes and radiant curls, lay sleeping on my bosom! I used to think he was especially "guarded," that the "angels were always whispering to him," for his rosebud lips were wont to smile in sleep more than any baby lips were ever known to smile before. Four years of an existence that was heaven, but a heaven that, once vanishing, left me suffering the tortures of a spirit driven from her natural sphere.

I have tasted of a joy that was almost superhuman; I have gathered the brightest flowers of life, and the joy has turned into irremediable sorrow, the blossoms have been wrested from my hand; but, like a garland of immortelles, they hang round the tomb of my



buried bliss, dearer and far more precious in my sight than the freshest flowerets of Eden that could ever be culled again.

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My little one had begun to toddle, and during my husband's absence he and I used to go out together upon the well-kept lawn; baby each moment measuring his tiny length upon the velvety sward, but never suffering from his fall—he was so like a snow-ball, so white, so soft, so round. Then would rise up, upon the silent grounds, a peal of sweet childish merriment, as with his liliputian fists he pulled up bunches of silvery daisies and golden buttercups, and flung them at me with a quaint defiant look in his little up-turned face.

One day, wearied by our romps, I was lying on the grass whilst he knotted his wild-flowers into my hair, when an unusual sound struck upon my ear—a sort of measured “tramp, tramp” of human feet upon the lonely road hard by. What could it mean, that strange and horrid sound? I started up, with my brain in a whirl, and a tightening sickening sensation about my heart, and catching baby in my arms I rushed to the low wall that enclosed the little garden. Then something met my sight—four or five men walking slowly, slowly, at a funereal pace, bearing a sort of litter with a ghastly burden on it—what?

O my God, and I live to write it!

It was Frank, my darling, my husband! He had fallen from his horse, entangling his foot, and the brute had dragged him along the hard and cruel road, until all hope of life was extinct, and death was nigh at hand.

The sunny hair, amongst whose golden rings my fingers had so often wandered, was all matted with dust and blood, that still trickled in sluggish drops from a great gash on the blue-veined temple. The godlike form was crushed and bent, like that of a helpless cripple; the strong man, in the zenith of his beauty and his age, was reduced to a mass of scarce breathing clay.

A cry went up from my breast, loud in its deep agony, piteous, unearthly in its terrible despair—the cry of a broken heart!

It seemed to arrest the flight of the soul that was already hovering on the dread portals of eternity; for the lids unclosed, and the blue eyes slowly turned, and looked on me just once again; and faint languid accents breathed lowly in my straining ear—

“Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Then he said, “Bear up, Evelyn, my own! Live for our child, dear wife!”

I never uttered a word; but down upon my shaking knees I watched that most beloved face turning from pallor into an awful ashen gray. I saw the blue eyes glazing over beneath my very gaze. With my two hands grasping his, in that strong unyielding grasp that goes before a terrible, a *final* parting, I marked the beating of his heart grow weaker and weaker, and then it ceased; and I knew that my husband was dead: but I knelt beside him still, with never a sound passing my lips, for all within me was turned to stone. No feeling, not even misery, was left me in that moment of complete blankness. A child's shrill frightened accents, “Mamma, mamma!” resounded near; two baby arms clung round my neck, and I fell to the ground, crushed—insensible.

PART III.

THEY took him away from me whilst I lay in that heavy trance; and for many and many a day the blessing of unconsciousness was vouchsafed me. Then I awoke at last to everything, when the sun was shining brightly on the flowers, and the birds sang gaily on the trees, and darkness was nowhere but in my own soul. With difficulty I reached the grave where they had laid him. My darling, my darling! The cruel earth divided me from the heart on which my head had so often rested. I pressed my breast frantically to the cold damp sod, and my quivering fingers strove with maniacal force to put aside the barrier that hid him from my yearning sight. My Frank! my husband! whose dead face, whose senseless form, were dearer and far more beautiful to my eyes than the brightest living image upon earth; whose stilled voice yet rang so sweetly on my ear; whose memory will never fade from my faithful breaking heart.

A fervent wish that I too might die was in my breast; then back to me came my lost love's words, "Live for our child, dear wife;" and kneeling there beside his grave, I prayed Heaven to grant me strength to carry out his last desire.

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A sober happiness came at length; my boy began to fill the void in my heart. He was five years old, and the loveliest, sweetest child that mother's eyes ever looked and doated on; with sunny hair that the sunbeams had seemed to kiss until each silky curl shone like the purest gold, and great fearless laughing eyes.

His childish prattle was music ; his laugh the only joy I knew.

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It was on a summer's day ; the sky was blue, the roses bloomed, the butterflies chased each other gaily through the balmy air, and the grass that grew round my husband's grave was fresh and soft and green.

My boy and I had wandered there ; and rapt in a vision of the past, I sat unconscious of the outer world, when his little voice broke up my day-dream.

"Where is papa ?" he asked.

"In heaven, amongst the angels, Franky."

"Is he happy there ?"

"Yes, my child ; far happier than we are on earth."

"But he *can't* be ; he hasn't any birds or butterflies to look at, as *we* have, mamma."

Butterflies and birds were sufficient then for my little one's happiness. I had not the heart to tell him that the very things that pleased him most but added by their contrast to *my* bitter gloom. So I answered nothing.

"Mamma, if papa is sleeping here, how can he be up there in the sky ?"

"*He* is here, darling, but his soul is with God."

"He *must* be happy though, mamma."

"Amen, amen !" I inwardly faltered.

"For he has such a nice bed here, with these pretty flowers always near him, and the warm sun shining down upon him. Mamma, I *wish* my bed was here too."

"Franky, don't, don't !" I sobbed, catching him in my arms, and covering him with eager passionate kisses as I strained him to me. His innocent words

had raised such a tumult within me. What if I should lose him too ! But I drove the maddening thought away. I felt I could not bear it and live.

And yet I do !

Only a month after, he died in these arms, whose frantic hold was yet helpless to detain him—died with the fever flushing his cheeks and lighting up his eyes, his little hot hand close clasped in mine, whilst his weak voice murmured, “Don’t cry, mamma ; I am going to be happy with papa and the angels ; and I shall sleep among the flowers, with the birds and the butterflies, and you sitting by my side on the nice green grass. *Don’t* cry so, mamma !”

* * * *

The night has closed in, but through the trailing shadows I see the white headstones gleaming.

Mother ! Frank ! my little child ! my heart is with you though I linger here awhile !

Fidelis ad urnam !





THE SIN OF MAUDE CONYERS.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

RETROSPECTION.

OUTSIDE, the deep gloom of a night in midwinter, with the low and sullen roar of waves dashing against a shingly beach, lashed into greater fury by wild gusts of wind, that, blowing freely across the main, sweep shrilly round the edges of the cliff, near which a lonely cottage stands. The skies, black and utterly starless, hang heavily like a huge pall over the earth, and the rain pours down on sea and land.

Inside, a bright brisk fire lights up a small and square room, in which everything around, although betokening the usual necessities of existence, is of the plainest and most unpretending mould. No useless ornaments, no rare porcelain or glittering bric-à-brac—the luxuries and frivolities that belong to happy lives—are to be seen. The whole of the apartment bears upon it an impress of almost conventional simplicity, from the low undecorated ceiling down to the wooden flooring. Three paintings in plain oaken frames are the sole adornments to the homely plastered walls. The largest one, that holds

the place of honour over the narrow mantelboard, represents an ancient and noble pile, surrounded by high ancestral trees—and its name, “Castle Conyers,” is inscribed in legible letters below.

A lovely villa *ornée*, with long French casements that open down to a velvet lawn, and with its white façade lavishly covered by masses of Virginian creeper, the fervid-hued leaves of which mingle with the pale petals of delicate white roses and the tender green of the scented brier; and the total wreck of the yacht *Sylphide* off the treacherous Cornish coast—form the subjects of the other two.

These three pictures tell the whole tale of a life.

The stately castle, in which a human being first saw the light in this weary world; “the sweet home,” in which a human soul revelled for a while in more than earthly bliss; and the wreck, in which the happiness of a loving heart was lost for ever and aye.

A narrow mirror suspended on the wall reveals the figures of the two inmates of the cottage.

One is that of a woman of middle age, robed in a heavy dress of black. Her features are wan and thin, her eyes leaden-lidded from many a long night vigil of bitter tears; and her hair is pushed back carelessly and unbecomingly from off her pale temples, revealing a face that is prematurely old. Opposite to her sits a child of seven years, bending intently over some writing that lies before him. A boy with an angel’s countenance, with soft eyes of sapphire, and long golden curls falling over his neck on to the black tunic he wears.

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“Mamma, see how nice my name looks!” a childish voice exclaimed gleefully, breaking the

thread of memory, and startling me into attention ; at the same time a copybook was pushed across the table for my approval, and " Angus Conyers Dillon" lay before me, as if in flaming letters of fire, although they were only in a child's text-hand. *His* name ! *his*, my poor little nameless darling ! Ay di me ! for his mother, miserable and heart-weary, lacked the courage to try and awaken his infant mind to the dreadful, the fatal truth. I could not withdraw my gaze from the writing. It was as if a basilisk held me in its power. Yet I saw nothing—nothing ; for the words swam before my vision, and the letters seemed to dance as if in very mockery of my grief and shame ! Hot scalding tears burnt my lids and coursed one another rapidly down my cheeks, but I durst not wipe them off, for fear of attracting the boy's notice ; so I shaded my eyes with my two hands, and leaning forward on the table, made a feint of examining the copy. That name, " Angus Conyers Dillon," had reunited completely the broken chain of my thoughts, and memory, upon wings of the wind, was wandering hither and thither—first to the gloomy old pile of my birth ; then to the flower-decked home in Devon ; and then, ah then ! to that most terrible wreck—when my hands were pulled away, and a cherub face peered piteously up into mine.

" Mamma, what are you crying for ? Look how naughty you are to put such a big blot on my name !"

I started as if I had been stung, and stared aghast in a foolish helpless fashion at the little one. In the feverish state to which imagination had worked up my poor brain, his words hit so hard, *so* hard. Just for an instant I gazed bewildered, not comprehending in the least what he meant.

"Yes, look!" he said, pointing out with the top of a tiny finger the evidence of my crime.

It was quite true; a big tear, unconsciously to myself, had fallen on the paper, and blurred all the letters of which he had been so proud.

"I did not mean to do it, darling, I didn't indeed!" I exclaimed in choking tones. "O, I never, *never* meant to blot out your name, my darling, my child!" I kept on murmuring over and over again, sadly and wearily and remorsefully enough, Heaven knows, to the boy who could not understand my terrible grief, or my bitter, bitter penitence.

The pair of liquid sapphires gave me a pitying glance, and clambering up into my lap, he laid his golden head on my shoulder.

"Never mind, mamma," he coaxed in a consolatory voice, endeavouring to wipe away my tears with all the force he owned. "You must never be so naughty again! And now tell me a nice story—the story I like." Then half closing his white eyelids, he composed himself to listen quietly.

I knew the story he liked so much. It was a very simple version of the sufferings of poor Hagar and her Ishmael. And I narrated it as pathetically as I could, until I saw that sleep was rapidly stealing over him, and that with great difficulty he listened to the troubles which I recounted for the fiftieth time of the wretched wanderers of the desert.

"My pet must say his prayers before he goes to sleep," I said, putting him gently down; and, kneeling beside me, with one of my hands tightly clasped in his own, and his face buried in the folds of my dress, he sent up his little prayer:

"God bless mamma and me, and make us both good, that we may see papa again."

It was only a little prayer that he had made himself when he first began to speak, but my heart responded fervently to it, "Amen, amen!"

I took him up in my arms and kissed him a score of times passionately. He was my child, my all on earth, the only ray of sunshine that my dark life possessed. Then I carried him into the other room; and when he slept calmly and peacefully in his tiny cot, smiling in his happy dream just as though the angels were indeed whispering to him, I returned to my old chair opposite the mirror, to tell the story of my life—a life, alas! both sinful and sorrowful.

Though it is a bitter task to dwell on retrospection, to probe deeply afresh the unclosed wounds that lie festering in my soul, and to expose the feelings to stranger eyes that my breast once cherished, and at the very recollection of which my cheek burns with shame; yet methinks the very punishment and torture of my self-imposed task may, in some measure, atone for the sin of the wretched past.

PART I.

It was, as I have already said, within the stately walls of Castle Conyers that I first opened my eyes upon this world. O God! how often in the depths of despondency and grief have I sinfully cursed the hour of that birth, and down on my bended knees wearied the Almighty with frantic prayers to take back from me the life that He gave! A swelling heart full of rebellion, and a chafing spirit fretted with dire dis-



content, that could ill brook and bear the heavy burden of sorrow laid upon them, were mine ; but now at last, patience and resignation, born perchance of sheer hopelessness and despair, have come to me, and I strive to wait quietly until *His* will be done. Then, when my sad pilgrimage is ended, I shall sleep—ay, sleep—the sound slumber that has no awakening, that brings no dream of either joy or woe !

Castle Conyers had been the home of my forefathers for many generations. It was a proud and palatial pile, built as far back as the year 1300, by a Hildebrand Conyeare, who was knighted for a series of gallant services rendered to King Edward the First, to whom he was a devoted subject. He fell, pierced to the heart, in the thickest of the fight between the forces of Aymer de Valence and Robert Bruce, and was found on the field of battle with the English standard clasped tightly to his breast.

The site selected for the mansion had been on the ruins of an ancient monastery, and the house was a fit habitation for royalty itself ; but, in spite of its extreme grandeur and beauty, and the picturesque points of its situation, there was a something chilling and even repelling in its aspect ; a severity in the architecture, on which traces of monastic simplicity still lingered ; a hardness and formality in the very squareness of the massive turrets that crowned the building ; a narrowness and prison-like look in the diamond-paned windows ; and a gloom in the time-blackened façade of grey stone, with the huge hatchment looming above the principal portal, that never appeared to come down from its elevated position. A lengthy avenue of fine old trees led up for more than a quarter of a league to the Castle, with their

luxuriant foliage so closely interlaced overhead, that even during the brightest summer hours great dark shadows slanted down on the broad road beneath.

On one side of the house lay a glorious forest of magnificent growth ; and on the other side, over green fields and sloping glades and dells, glimpses were caught from the tall observatory tower of the Channel, whose waters sparkled up a dozen prismatic hues beneath the ardent sunbeams.

We Conyers were a peculiar race. We were *ultrismo* in pride and self-will, and domineering in manner, lording it over our neighbours in a fashion that was ducal. We were proud of our ancient pedigree, and of the patronymic that had so many heroic deeds linked with it in the country's annals.

We were proud of our escutcheon, that had rested ever pure and untarnished as undriven snow—free from foul slur and wicked slander ; and we were proud of the enormous coffers that had come to us, not by labour or talent, but by the undoubted right of lords of the soil for many and many a thousand acres.

Pride, by which "angels have fallen," was the ruling passion of our breasts, the besetting sin of the family—fulsome, uncompromising, narrow pride had descended to us as natural an heirloom as the old Castle itself. And we pampered it, and fed it, and hugged it to our hearts, and held it as our dearest possession.

My father, Sir Hildebrand Conyers, was in ever respect a fit suzerain for his regal home. He was very tall man, straight as an arrow, stately as one of his ancestral oaks ; and he had high aquiline features and hawk-like eyes, and hair as soft as spun silk and shining like silver. Dressed habitually in rich velvet

with priceless point for collar and ruffle, and his locks worn long and flowing, after the mode of centuries back, he looked as if he had just stepped out of one of the great worm-eaten frames in the old picture-gallery that occupied a whole wing of the building.

Reserved almost to moroseness, pompous in his bearing, and hard as adamant in his nature, he never unbent or displayed even a transitory emotion of tenderness or kindness. It was scarcely a marvel, then, that I feared him and did not love him. Memory cannot recall to me one kiss from paternal lips, or an approving glance. The echo of his slow step resounding on the broad oaken staircase was wont to send me scared and shrinking back into myself in a white tremor. And no gleam of joyousness could have been detected on my features, or a feeling of freedom discovered in my bosom, when within sight of his cold grey eyes, that always seemed to pierce me through and through with a hard and unrelenting scrutiny that was most painful to bear; and yet, even when a little child, I had sense enough to divine that often when that terrible glance rested upon me, he really saw nothing; for he was subject to strange fits of abstraction, that drew him right away into a world of memories or visions that were not pleasing, judging by the impress they left upon his face.

I used often to wonder, after the manner of curious children, what he could be thinking of, and puzzle my poor little brain by trying to make out a history in his impassive countenance; but it was not an agreeable study; no lights ever appeared to break out through the profound gloom of his features, and yet they were not soft enough to denote sadness.

Had my father ever been different? I used to say to myself sometimes. Surely he must have had some tenderness in his heart at some period of his existence, even if stern realities or weighty grief had crushed all softness out of him later. Then an old nurse, garrulous and indiscreet, who had been a retainer of the family since the youth of Sir Hildebrand, whispered a tale into my ears one evening, as she and I sat side by side in the big recess of a window during the gloom.

Her story possessed a wondrous interest for me, for it spoke of "love"—love passionate, self-abnegatory, and life-enduring, such as even in my childhood, with queer precocity of feeling, I had learnt to picture as the only end and aim of a true woman's existence. She told me of a village maiden—pure as a snowdrop, modest as a violet, and lovely as a wild rose—with whom the heir of the Conyers had kept many a long and loving tryst, down in the sweet sequestered woodland paths that lay hard by, forgetting for a while the sinfulness of his pride in the holiness of an honest love, until malevolent tongues revealed the secret, guarded for so long. Then the meetings beneath the arching elms, with floods of moonlight bathing each flower and leaf around in liquid lustre, and falling softly on two young faces, came abruptly to a close. The high-born lover was seen no more wandering hand in hand with the rustic girl. He left for foreign lands, to forfeit his promised troth 'twas true, but to preserve intact from speck or soil the Conyers' honour and pride. And when he came back once more to his feudal home, all danger of a *mésalliance* was past; no more temptation from the lovely face and tempting form of the village girl could assail him, for her



broken heart lay hid beneath a grassy mound in the little churchyard, close to the trysting-trees.

The old beldame's tale was only an outline, after all, lacking all the finished detail that my romantic fancy craved to hear; but yet the story, short and sketchy as it was, with a theme that, Heaven knows, is worn threadbare enough in this world, impressed my imagination strangely; and often and often, ensconced in some dark and distant corner of the great library, I would find myself scanning my father's face as the flickering firelight fell upon it, showing up the rigid lines, the firm-set lips, and the "steely" eyes so clearly; and I would try and picture those hard lines relaxing, the set lips softening into a smile, the cold eyes shedding copious tears on the grave of his early love.

Sir Hildebrand, in spite of the secluded life he led in the country, was yet an eager politician, and conservative to the backbone. He was usually a silent man; and I never saw him stirred into an unmistakable ebullition of wrath but once in my life—for he had extraordinary control over himself, and the only signs of anger he gave were a sudden lividness that would steal over his cheek, and a curious lurid gleam that would shoot athwart his eyes; but in this instance he lost his habitual self-command, and spoke in a low condensed tone of voice that frightened me. It was in rebuke of an indiscreet guest, who, perchance in joke, mooted some sentiment that savoured of democratic principles. I was too young to comprehend the subject of dispute, but the unusual expression that crossed my father's brow, and the impatient grind of his heel on the tessellated flooring, were quite enough. I wanted no other signs to

realize the enormity of the offence, and I trembled for the foolhardy offender.

My childhood was an unhappy one. A wild game of romps—that luxury of a merry child—was a boon that I had never known; exuberance of spirits was tabooed me; and fear and pride, two feelings inconsistent with each other, were yet the sensations that were ever uppermost in my breast.

Like a tiny spectre, with a scared expression and frightened eyes, haunting the huge dreary corridors and long bleak passages, I was wont to creep about silently and stealthily on tiptoe, with a poor blanched little face and a sinking spirit, that dreaded an encounter with Sir Hildebrand's tall figure on the way. To the dependents I was overweeningly proud and imperious, holding my head aloft, and with the overbearing haughtiness of my race regarding all around as mere scum of the earth, showing a supercilious scorn and contempt that must have been laughable to behold in so young a child.

My mother died when I was only six years of age, but even during her lifetime I saw but little of her. I remember that I regarded her with a sort of religious adoration and admiration, just as one would look upon an angel or a star, or a splendid painting, or a piece of statuary, that one dared not approach too near, or touch without permission.

Each night and morning I used to be taken up into a sumptuous apartment, all hung with amber and silver, to receive a maternal kiss from lips so red, so beautiful, but so strangely cold—lips that mechanically touched my baby brow, but which never uttered soft words to the only offspring that God had given her.

My mother was no Saxon beauty, with coral and



opal tints and cerulean orbs. Her cheek was rich and glowing with the crimson roses of the South; her eyes were dark and luminous, and heavy blue-black tresses crowned her imperial brow. Her form was as grand and majestic as an Eastern queen's. Like Semiramis of old, she looked fit to rule the world, and to my eyes she appeared more than a creature of mortal mould. I would gaze on her extreme loveliness in a species of wonderment, and feel a passionate longing to see the red curved lips smile; but her smiles were very rare—weariness and scorn were the expressions that hovered upon her mouth and shone out of her large eyes; and when a smile came, there was nothing genial or genuine in it. It was just like a sun-gleam from a wintry sky, shedding no warmth or light where it fell. But even in their hard repose her features were perfect.

Her heart was dead to all living things, like her husband's; she had buried it in the tomb of a first passion.

Her marriage had been one of ambition. It was not to gain position that she became Sir Hildebrand's wife; for the "Ricardo" came of as noble a stock in Italy as the Conyers did in England.

But the Contessa Rosità, with all the blue blood that ran through her veins, yet wanted the where-withal that could support her dignity royally, and deck her superb form in the jewels and cloth of gold that she loved so well; so when Sir Hildebrand proffered his hand, she accepted it as a key to the Conyers' coffers; and her husband, insensible to all her beauty and grace, except in as far as recognising that she was a suitable helpmate in birth and breeding to himself, never even asked her to give him "love."

All the intense fervour of her true southern nature had been lavished on an Italian officer, whom she had believed to be her devoted slave, until awakened to his falsity by his marriage with her young sister Giulia. Her affection for Carlo Ferrari turned to bitter hatred, until just three years after her own marriage she was summoned to his deathbed.

Then, down on her knees by her first lover's couch, watching the light of life dying out of his eyes, and a grey pallor creeping over the face that had won her virgin heart, the proud beauty forgave his defalcation, and pardoned the stab in her soul that she knew would never heal: and holding a trembling hand within her own firm clasp, she swore to guard and cherish as her own the child he bequeathed to her care, and whose mother had died in giving him birth. To save the boy from being homeless and friendless, Lady Conyers took him to her arms; and thus it was that my cousin Amadeo Ferrari became an inmate of Castle Conyers and my rival, whom I hated; for he had smiles and caresses from my mother, when I, flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone, inheriting her features, and longing with a keen and irrepressible longing for her tenderness, was regarded carelessly, nay, even put aside to make way for the son of the man whom she had adored.

Alas that even in such early days germs of hateful passions, of hate and envy, should have been sown in my heart, and let to grow and ripen! And yet I feel that my nature was not wholly bad, that one loving hand could have smoothed away the wrinkles that disfigured my character, and by patiently plucking away the tares, have encouraged good seed to flourish; but lonely, neglected, and unloved, I struggled on through

childhood into maidenhood, old before my time, hardened to all soft and womanly feelings by the knocks and brunts that met me at every turn.

One day an unusual stillness reigned in the Castle. The voices of the servants came in low whispers; and even Amadeo's laugh was rebuked by the woman who held the office of *gouvernante*, and with whom my cousin was prime favourite, either from the merits he possessed, but which my prejudiced eyes could never discern the existence of, or else as a mode of ingratiating herself with Lady Conyers, whose fondness for the boy was undisguisedly displayed.

At last I ventured to ask the cause of the solemn stillness that was everywhere. "My lady is very ill, Miss Maude, and it does not become you to be worrying with questions, when, maybe, your mamma is at death's door," was the sharp and curt reply I received. But I never heeded it. I kept on repeating to myself in a bewildered sort of way, "Mamma is at death's door," until wonderment and terror overcame me, and I crept away and hid myself in a corner of a room that was nearly filled with lumber. I wanted to think undisturbed.

Hour after hour of the bright day I sat in the gloomy place I had chosen, without once rising to peep out of the window upon the sunlit flowers, and the gay birds and butterflies that were disporting themselves in full enjoyment of sweet summer outside.

I was trying hard to realize my mother in death, when she would lie in the big dark mausoleum where all the Conyers had slept side by side for so many generations. I was trying to picture her beautiful glowing cheeks, white and cold like marble, and her lovely star-like eyes, with all their light quenched, and

hidden by heavy closed lids, and her scarlet lips a set and rigid with the curling scorn gone out from them; and all of a sudden a great horror rose up before me of the figure of Death, with its icy fingers pressing the life from my heart; and laying my head down on an old trunk, I cried myself to sleep, and only awoke when the evening shadows were filling the room, and making the lumber assume such weird fantastic shapes, that, uttering a shrill scream, I fled up the stairs into the nursery, and hid myself in my bed.

The next day my mother died; and a week afterwards, with eyes that had more astonishment than tears in them, I watched the funeral pageant before the house, and felt sorrow when it moved out of view. Not because I realized my loss, but because the sight was a novel one; and the black horses tossing their heads and waving the great ebon feathers to and fro pleased my childish fancy so much.

The months rolled by, and Lady Conyers, with her proud face and haughty bearing, had well-nigh passed from the memory of all.

It was only I who remembered her well. In the dark night-watches I used to see her in my dreams, sitting before me in the glory of her beauty, or leaning forward to kiss me in the cold grave way she used to do; and through the daylight her features seldom left me; until a desperate longing came over me to look even at her likeness which hung in the gallery, high up on the wall, with a thick curtain to shield it from dust or injury. It was a *chef-d'œuvre* of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and was carefully kept in consequence.

I was determined to break through the great barrier of fear in which Sir Hildebrand's presence always

bound me, and to prefer my request; and I watched my opportunity eagerly.

At length, one quiet afternoon, after I had gazed on my father's wan face for some time, and noted that the attitude he had assumed was a more sorrowful one than usual, I took courage and spoke; but habitual fear of him made my tones scarcely audible, and it was some time before his attention was arrested. Then something in my manner must have aroused his curiosity, for he fixed his cold grey eyes upon me in a way that nearly sent me from the room; but I had a good deal of self-control, and so I stood before him as still as a statue.

"May I look at mamma's picture?" was all I could utter, very low, with my hand on the long green baize covering. I trembled to pull it aside, and I could scarcely await his consent.

Sir Hildebrand stared at my wistful looks and hot flushed cheeks, and bit his thin lips. I fancied that the shadow of a grim smile flitted hastily over them; but I only heard a gruff sound issue, which I accepted as an affirmative to my request.

It was enough; and the next moment, perched on a chair, I gazed on my mother's portrait through eyes blinded with tears; and then, forgetting that I was not alone, I humbly and reverentially pressed my mouth to the very end of the long trailing velvet skirt.

Turning round in trepidation at my rashness, I saw a strange mist in Sir Hildebrand's eyes, and on the impulse of the moment I sprang from my elevated position, and, crouching down by his side, sobbed out loudly, "Papa, papa!"

A strong arm put me roughly aside, and a face that appeared harder and sterner than ever, looked down

upon me. I shivered, and longed to sink into the floor out of his sight.

"Maude! never dare to be so foolish again. Learn to control yourself, and never sacrifice your pride to any other feeling. I am ashamed of you, crying like a baby. Go away, and do not come here to trouble me again!" Then, turning abruptly on his heel, he walked up to the window, whilst I shrank away like a beaten hound into the most lonely portion of the grounds.

There was cool shadow beneath the ancient trees, whose large arms stretched yearningly to the heavens. There was a strong fragrance of flowers around me, a hum of insects rose up from the ground, and a duet between a rivulet that ran close by with some fluttering leaflets was murmured in my ears as I sat on a fallen branch, with tears blistering my cheeks, and my heart aching with a greater sense of loneliness than it had ever known before; while my eyes mechanically followed the happy flight of birds across the sky, and the dancing of the butterflies over the scented bloom.

PART II.

It was barely two years after the death of my mother, that Sir Hildebrand, after a longer absence than he had ever made from the Castle, brought home another bride. This time his choice had fallen on a fair and noble Scotchwoman, the "tocherless" daughter of an impoverished earl.

The second Lady Conyers was a complete antithesis to the first one, not only in person but in character. She was a fragile being with bright golden hair, and



soft but meaningless features, and her disposition was meek, like her face. She presented a curious contrast to her haughty lord, as, clinging to his arm with shy and downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, she entered as mistress of the grand domain.

I watched her entry from a window, and welcomed her to the Castle with feelings in which pity and hatred were strangely commingled. I hated her for filling the place of my dead mother, and for being the object in whose honour the bonfires blazed and triumphal arches were erected on every side: and I pitied her for having come to a princely prison, where coldness and hardness would starve her heart to death.

Not even her friendly kiss and greeting had the power to awaken any emotions of kindliness in my bosom. I *could not* breathe the same air as she did without a feeling of stifling, and while she and I remained inmates of the same walls I shunned her presence and loathed her sight as though she had been repulsive to look upon, instead of a bright and lovable woman. But my "durance vile" lasted but a little time, and after the birth of a daughter my step-mother was carried away to the family vault, with all the grand solemnity of ceremony that her predecessor had had.

My sister Avice was nearly ten years younger than myself, and beautiful with the pure pearly tints of a Saxon. Her eyes were of true turquoise shaded by the longest lashes in the world; her hair was of the lightest gold and wonderfully luxuriant, and she wore it, even when she grew to womanhood, in loose waving masses over her lovely white shoulders. Her form was slight, and she had a simple spirit, and a warm

loving heart that clung gratefully to any who gave her a kindly word.

Her sweet disposition and winning ways had captivated even my father; for ever and anon I could see him, as if unconsciously to himself, pass his hand caressingly over her shining head, while a softened expression would play on his countenance as she lifted up her rosebud lips for a good-night kiss. I used to try, but vainly, to smother the pang of jealousy that rose turbulently up, and strive not to wish my little sister any ill, although I envied her so much the capability of winning affection that Heaven had denied to me from the hour I was born.

Poor Avice! how vividly I recollect the deprecatory wistful look in her soft eyes, when, in lieu of evoking a little warmth or love from me in return for some impulse of tenderness on her part, she would see me turn away from her brusquely and feel me shiver at her gentle touch! But I could not help it. It seemed so unutterably hard that Amadeo should have engrossed all my mother's affection, and that my sister should have found a warm spot in my father's breast that had ever been cold for me.

As the years grew on, and Avice emerged from childhood into maidenhood, it became evident that my cousin Amadeo cherished strong feelings of attachment for her; but although, with the habitual meekness of her nature, she rested passive under his attentions, it was easy to perceive that no reciprocity reigned in her soul. Nay, at times I saw her shrink away from under the passionate gaze of his great Italian eyes, that were filled with all the fire and fervour of the sons of the South.

His face was proud and beautiful, like all his

mother's race, but it was painfully delicate, and his hair, black and glossy as a raven's plumage, fell over his neck and was pushed off his thin blue-veined temples. His hands and feet were as small as a woman's, and his figure tall and fragile; and there was ever a wildness in the working of his lips and a strangeness in his manner and gestures that was unpleasing to look upon. His temperament was fervid and romantic to an excess, and was just the one to yield to an over-heated brain, and to cause, if not madness, an incipient insanity. I was of too strong a mind to feel afraid of him; but Avice, of far weaker mould, experienced a real sentiment of fear at his violent fits of excitability. Amadeo was talented as a poet and a painter, but he lacked all knowledge of woman nature, and it was doubtless this failure in acute perception that blinded him so utterly to the evident fact of my sister's indifference to him; or else her angelic disposition deceived him to a certain extent; for she was of such a pliant yielding spirit, that, unable to grapple with another's will, a silken fibre would have been enough to lead her anywhere, even against her own desire.

It had ever been my habit to wander by myself through the forest and woodlands around. Avice was not hardy enough to accompany me often in the lengthy rambles which my restless nature loved, and which my strong physique enabled me to enjoy.

Air and freedom—the fresh air of heaven and the unfettered movements of a wild bird for ever on the wing—were the greatest luxuries in the world to me. I should have drooped like a field-flower within a hothouse had I been pent up within four walls. I ought to have been born a child of the desert—

allowed to roam over hill and dale—for my spirit chafed so sorely at the conventionalities and petty decorums that are exacted by society. I grew up like a weed ; uncultivated, but sturdy. If a hand had tried to train me in orthodox paths, I feel that it would have killed me outright. And yet I was inconsistent too, for with all my distaste and disdain of *les convenances*, the flavour of Conyers' pride, with which my character was so highly impregnated, made me look with the deepest admiration and respect on the portraits of my high-born ancestresses that, braced up in buckram and furbished to fashion's most elevated point, sat so stiff and stately to support their position with true dignity.

It was in one of my wanderings, in which the extreme fineness of the weather had tempted my sister to join me, that leaving the forest behind, we came in sight of Dillon Grange—an estate that lay in contiguity to the Castle. The warm sun shining down in full meridian ardour seared the blades of long grass, and sent his beams through the thick tree-tops, and across the indolent ripple of water.

In the foliage scarce a twig stirred above. The summer wind balmy albeit with fragrance, yet came to us both faint and slow in gentle whispers, that sounded like magic melody. Beneath the bright heavens, odours like incense to the god of light went up from tangled heaps of blossoms. Shadow was nowhere, and nothing savoured of coolness but the mossy bank on which Avice and I rested for a while.

Avice was silent. She was day-dreaming, and by her expression I knew that her soul was wandering far away into the regions of romance, in which it loved to revel.



But I was of a stronger nature, with feelings that were matter-of-fact and material.

She saw nothing; her fair throat looked like a drooping lily, as with her head bent downwards, her pellucid eyes were fixed on the ground, with the gilded atmosphere tinting her cheeks with the soft faint blush of a rose; but my restless gaze, in wandering hither and thither, from the enamelled turf to yellow-lighted tree-tops that formed our canopy, descried hard by the figure of a man lying on the velvet sward.

He was half asleep, or else so absorbed in thought that our presence on the scene was unobserved. I had thus ample leisure to scan him fully.

As he lay stretched on the grass, I could see that he was a tall man, with broad Atlantean shoulders and chest; with straightly-cut patrician features, dreamy eyes, and a massive white brow. His head rested on his hands; his straw hat was cast carelessly by, and he seemed to bear unflinchingly the ardent sunbeams that kissed his half-shut lids, and played upon the hair, of a warm chestnut shade, that waved off his temples in broad bright ripples, and upon a beard that fell low upon his breast. I never thought of drawing my sister's attention towards him, but I sat studying his features one by one, and dreading lest she should by the utterance of a word break the rapt trance into which I had unconsciously fallen. I seemed to divine intuitively that I was looking on the heir of Dillon Grange and *my fate!* I even caught myself wondering whether it would be a modern version of the old feud between the Montagues and Capulets; for I was aware that my father hated, with all the fierce rancour that his nature was capable of,

the whole race of Dillon for their popularity in the county, and their liberal politics. Often, when a little child, I used to listen to the bitter expressions of animosity with which the name of Dillon was invariably linked, and feel a strange conviction, that, to have evoked such dislike, they must be fiends incarnate in men's form divine. Whilst I sat there, looking my first on Angus Dillon, with all the fervour of my passionate soul going out in my glance, I strove to trace in his countenance some of the terrible demoniac spirit that I had always imagined lived within him and his—but I was completely at fault. His face and form were a pride to manhood, and I knew later that the noblest, grandest soul looked out of the wondrous dark grey eyes that soon became the only daystars of my life. It would be a futile task to try and depict the novel feelings that were born within me, as—statuesque in outward quietude—my breast throbbed with a tumult that I had never felt before. If it had been womanly to do so, I believe I should have spanned the distance that lay between him and me, and kneeling by that recumbent figure, have yielded up a heart full of worship—pure but idolatrous in its magnitude.

Can it be love? I murmured faintly to myself. Love, so mighty and so terribly omnipotent? Love at first sight had appeared to me hitherto nothing but a miserable phantasy, an ephemera, a wretched unreality, that sober sense could not believe in. But it *was* love; and my heart had succumbed humbly, helplessly, to the power of a face!

O, how I despised myself for my miserable weakness and folly! But I knew that the waves that were sweeping in big surges over my soul had been stirred

by a mystic hand, and that I had already lost all will and strength to quell the tempest within me. I, who had laughed to scorn, as maudlin sentiment, the fervid brain that cherished fancy and romance, was now sure that I had looked on that face before somewhere, if it were only in a glorious dream in which I had been lifted from earth into heaven. I never moved or spoke, and scarcely breathed; and Avice, glad to be left undisturbed to weave golden tissues, as was her habit, did not break the spell that bound me.

The trees flung quivering shadows upon his cheek, and errant beams touched his hair and beard with a richer glow. Around him lay masses of fallen leaves that zephyr's wing had scattered here and there; and above him, flashing in the sunlight, like so many pendant gems from their setting of dark green, hung some snowy blossoms; but amidst the loveliness that filled the world, the sky, and the air, I saw nothing but him.

After a long, long while, Phœbus drove his chariot to westward, and then the evening shades began to close around us. I touched Avice on the arm quietly to rouse her into attention, and pointed silently to the figure lying on the grass. Already a mad, an incipient jealousy must have been born in my bosom; for as her large blue eyes turned upon him, and softened—ay, *softened*—as they gazed, I watched them with an eager scrutiny and a strangely beating heart,—watched to see if she too, like me, was looking her first on the love of her life.

Avice, the dangerous rival who possessed the magic power of gaining affection from all who knew her! And I saw by the light that came into her eyes, by the sudden flushing of her fair pale face, by the little

quiver that passed over her red under-lip, that her soul too was stirred, as mine had been, by the first breath of a love that would never, *never* die!

Seizing her roughly by the sleeve, I drew her away, reluctant and lingering in her steps. My fingers twitched nervously together, and seemed to steal upwards, upwards to her white throat. I feared I should work her some ill if we stood any longer together. I hated her so for being beautiful, lest at any time her beauty should find favour in *his* eyes. And I loathed myself for being so different from her; and yet perhaps my beauty was the more perfect of the two; for I had inherited all the rich colouring and the dark gleaming eyes of my southern mother, and my form was regal and stately enough.

"Come, Avice," I desired her imperiously, as she turned round on the rising slope to look again. "It is getting late, and Sir Hildebrand will be more wrathful than is even his habit."

I rarely called him "father," as my sister always did. He had never been a father to me; but she had crept into his heart, and he had no lowering brow and black glances for her.

When I sat apart in the shadow of the casement, as though I had been a cursed pariah, trying to picture a happier *home* than the one I had in each of the bright stars that looked down from the vaulted sky, their light would fall on my sister's fair head nestled close against Sir Hildebrand's arm, and the sight was one that made of me a second Cain. Biting my lips hard, I would quickly leave the room, and in the solitude of my own chamber pour out my anger and discontent.

"Maude, who can he be?" Avice whispered in low



tones, that to my excited fancy seemed to shake a little. I longed to tell her that I loved him already with a fierce unreasoning love—a love that would bear no meddling—a wild love that would brook no barrier and know no obstacle on earth. I longed to warn her, then and there, that my heart would own no rival living—that death, ruthless and merciless, was the only thing that would take him from me; but I durst not.

“A Dillon,” I answered curtly; “one of a family to whom you know Sir Hildebrand gives bitterest hatred—whom I have heard him *curse*, Avicé!” And I hissed it out, to make it fall more impressively on her ear.

“No, no; not curse, surely!” she said, with a little shiver that angered me sorely. What right had she to feel anything where he was concerned?

“O, Maude, he looks so good, he could not merit so dreadful a thing as a curse.”

So good and so *beautiful* she ought to have said, if she had spoken her thoughts; but it was not deceit that restrained her, she was only reticent from a maidenly modesty; and yet I ground my heel impatiently at the faint praise she had uttered.

“You had better drive him out of your head at once, whether he be good or otherwise, child; you can never be anything to him but a stranger,” I asserted, in my usual domineering accents, beneath the impetuosity of which my sister always gave way. Then I mooted some other subject, while my thoughts never swerved from the forbidden theme for her.

There were never any sisterly confidences between us; and I thanked Heaven that, according to habit, our hearts were now locked away from each other’s gaze.

I used to suspect, many and many a time, that Advice had not done my bidding, and chased away a memory from her mind; for she became more silent, and she daily appeared to shrink away more from the slightest look or touch of Amadeo; and at times an unwonted angry flash would come from her eyes at the smallest sign of his devotion to her.

But if she remembered Angus Dillon, what did I do?—for my feelings for him, in comparison with hers, must have been burning lava to ice; and as the days dragged slowly and wearily on, in lieu of time erasing his image, or making it wax fainter on the tablets of my memory, an incessant longing—an overwhelming desire—grew upon me to look upon him once again.

PART III.

THE intense desire of my soul was accomplished. The moon was in its infancy when I had first seen that glorious face; it was at its full when Sir Hildebrand, thrown violently from his horse, was brought home—severely though not mortally injured—in Angus Dillon's care.

After that, the rancour of old seemed to have passed out of my father's mind, either in gratitude for the zealous attention of which fate had made him a recipient, or else in obedience to the laws of hospitality, a virtue which the Conyers had ever claimed especially as their own. Dillon became at the Castle an honoured and a favoured guest. We heard then, from different sources, the story of his life, and knew that that story had left him a saddened man. Four years back, while travelling in the sunny South, a

French girl crossed his path, whom he loved and wedded. But Camille Desgranges was of so poor and plebeian a parentage, that the marriage proved distasteful to proud old Hugh Dillon of the Grange, and he disinherited his only son.

For some few months husband and wife struggled bravely through want of means, but under parental displeasure the funds waxed lower and lower; then leaving his wife in her humble home, Angus sailed in quest of fortune to distant Australian fields, and when he had amassed a moderate sum, wrote to France for his young wife. Full of joy and hope to fold her once more in his arms, he watched eagerly for her coming; but he watched in vain. The vessel in which she had sailed was wrecked, and all on board were supposed to have perished.

When the subject of contention was lost for ever, Hugh Dillon, relenting, took back his heir, never recking that the luxury of the Grange was as nothing to the man whose heart lay buried in a watery grave.

He came back to his native country a changed being. All the joyousness and geniality for which he had been distinguished in earlier years was quenched; and though grief had not soured his nature, it had left an unmistakable impress upon him.

Time wore on, and my love for Angus Dillon—which I neither tried to stem nor smother—grew into a species of wild idolatry. He was my dream by night, my one thought by day. Over and over again I would stoop and passionately kiss the very sod on which his foot had rested.

Alas, Avice loved him too, but in a different way. There was no vehemence or fire in her passion. Although his coming brought the flickering colour

into her cheek, and a soft happy light to her ~~ma~~^{blue} eyes, she rather avoided than courted his presence—perhaps overpowered by the emotions that that presence gave.

I, who had known her from infancy, detected the signs of love but too well, but to others doubtless she appeared cold and shy.

Tossed ever in feverish doubts as to which of us found the most favour in his sight, for he never showed any difference between us, my heart was perpetually torn and tortured by perplexity and fear, until at times I felt almost mad; and an impulse would seize me to end the suspense that was killing me, to overstep the bounds of maidenly delicacy, and to probe the heart that I yearned so unutterably to gain for myself.

At length my doubts were quelled. And one day a sight met my gaze that made me feel as if death had come to me. Yet it was a sight that most eyes would have looked upon with pleasure. The sun was shining, the flowers were blowing, and two who loved were face to face and heart to heart!

I crept behind a sheltering tree with stealthy steps, and listened to their whispered words, while fierce jealousy and passion made my gait waver and my soul faint and sick. I do not believe even now that Angus ever meant to tell my sister that he loved her.

It must have been the subtle spell often born of such a scene that made him forget his drowned wife for a while in the glamour shed upon him by a lovely face.

"Avice!" I heard him murmur in a tone that would have bestowed on me a new lease of life, "I love you, and lay my happiness at your feet: will you take it into your gentle keeping after the storm that



Has almost wrecked it for ever ? Tell me, will you be my wife ?”

Avice’s eyes, eloquent with tenderness, rested upon him for an instant, and then their lips drooped ; but he had caught the glance, and the next moment, clasped in his arms, her fair head was pillowed upon his breast.

Enough, enough ! I stole away as noiselessly as I had come, into the darkest recess of the forest, and laying my burning forehead down upon some cool green leaves, and closing my eyes wearily, wearily, I wished that I was dead.

For hours I stayed in my leafy retreat, unmindful of time, until the fireflies began to show up their twinkling lamps, and the birds had gone to rest. Then I found my way to the lawn that lay before the house. There was no moonlight, but the clear sky was thickly studded over with brilliant stars. I paced up and down, up and down, until the clock in the centre tower striking one made me start and shake like an aspen. My pulse went rapidly, and my heart throbbed fiercely in unison. The delicious scent of flowers was on the night air, and complete stillness was around ; a strange fear knocked at my heart, it was the voice of a guilty conscience ! A little leaf fluttering against my hair as it fell from its parent tree made my whole frame tremble, and I fled quickly, and never stopped until I had reached my room and double-locked my door.

When I awoke, the heavens were streaked in the east with light. I lay still with half-closed lids, only semi-conscious, and trying to gather up my strength to meet the overwhelming tide of miserable recollections.

All at once, everything came back to me vividly, terribly ; and desperate and totally wretched, I rose to put into execution the sinful resolutions of the past night.

My first step was to seek Amadeo Ferrari, and, on pretext of a walk, to secure an undisturbed conversation with him.

This was feasible enough, and before noon I was sauntering through a remote portion of the grounds with my cousin by my side.

He looked woefully haggard in the glare of day, and there was an impress of sorrow on his brow that softened my feelings towards him.

I comprehended his ailment well. He too, like myself, was a sacrifice on the altar of others' happiness. In spite of his habitual obtuseness, he had marked the total change in my sister's demeanour of late, and had watched her drifting daily farther and farther out of his reach. There was no steadfastness in him, and though he would in a wild impetuous way have yielded up his life just for the infinite bliss of calling her his own, no scheme for clutching at his coveted prize presented itself to his brain. So I suggested one to him.

He was silent, and moodiness was the sole expression of his face as I glanced up into it.

"Amadeo, I fancied you cared for Avice?" I asked in a desultory fashion, in as indifferent a tone as I could assume.

He started at my words as though he had been stung, with the hot blood colouring his pale wan cheek with deep crimson, and with a fierce light flashing out of his great black eyes.

"Are you a fool?" he questioned angrily, stamping

his foot on the ground at me. "Care for Avice, indeed! I tell you that I love her, ay, love her so, that if she leaves me for any other man, I shall die or go mad, Maude!" he shouted into my ear; and as I saw the veins start up on his thin temples, and noted the look, I quite realized the truth of his assertion.

"Listen to me quietly, Amadeo," I answered: "you believe that Avice loves another; but she *does not*. She loves *you*, and you only. And if she marries Angus Dillon, it will be from motives of pride and ambition. The Dillons are rich folks, and she chooses to mate with one of as noble a stock as herself; but she is young and weak and tender-hearted. A word from you breathing affection will disperse all her worldly dreams, and evoke an avowal of her own feelings for you. No matter if her troth be pledged to another, her heart and soul are yours alone." And as I uttered the foul false words and saw their effect on his face, I *almost* faltered in my purpose.

"God bless you, Maude, for saying that!" he exclaimed joyously, catching my cold hand and kissing it in vehement gratitude. "I fancied you were an enemy, but you have proved to be my best friend! Avice shall know how passionately and madly I worship her, that I only live to call her mine, that I would wade through fire and water for her dear sake; but O, Maude!" and his voice became terribly piteous, "if Avice loves me as you say, why is she so cold to me?"

"Avice is shy, and she would sooner die than betray her affection for one who has never acknowledged his for her; but she cares for none but you, I know."

"Thank Heaven!" he ejaculated fervently. "Thank Heaven that my darling loves me—that happiness still

awaits me in this world !” and flinging himself down on his knees on the grass, he took off his hat reverentially, and, looking upwards, breathed a low thanksgiving to himself.

I stood and gazed at him, pitying his self-delusion, loathing myself for my duplicity, but wholly unable to abandon my resolve of severing my sister from the man I loved dearer than honour, or rectitude, or life.

The days went slowly by, each one planting fresh daggers in my breast. Avice’s betrothal was duly announced, with Sir Hildebrand’s fullest sanction, and the affianced lovers were let to roam alone. But I rarely lost sight of them for long. Like a wild beast, I was always on their track ; and though each caress or tender word came to me like a stab, the sight and sound girt me with farther strength to go on firm in my sinful purpose. I could not eat, or drink, or rest. My poor heart and brain burned with the gigantic struggle between right and wrong. All night long the quiet light of the pale stars seemed to sear my brow, and the glare of day made me shrink within myself for very shame ; but I could not—I could not give up the hope of winning him.

I planned a meeting with Angus Dillon as an essential furtherance of my scheme. The perseverance of love had taught me his daily movements, and it was an easy task to intercept him on his diurnal visit to the Castle, as though by chance. The grounds round Conyers were magnificent, and in many parts as secluded as though no human dwelling lay within reach for miles.

Right away towards Dillon Grange there was an artificial cutting through a large rock, with an archway of century-old trees above. It was just like the

cloisters of an ancient monastery : the stones were cool and agreeable to the feet, and on either side bunches of feathery ferns nodded their heads, and green tufts of moss peeped out of the crevices. And it was there that I met Angus Dillon one bright summer's eve. It was the first time I had been alone with him since he had told Avice of his love, and the memory of all I had suffered by that avowal gave me fresh impetus now.

" Mr. Dillon, I wanted to speak to you, and am glad of an opportunity of doing so."

" Speak on, fair lady," he answered gaily.

Since my sister had pledged herself to him, his manner had grown far more joyous than of old.

" But why am I Mr. Dillon? Call me Angus; for am I not going to be your brother, Maude?"

My brother! At that cruel word darkness came over my vision, the ground seemed to swim and rock before me; and, to keep myself steady, I caught at a neighbouring branch.

The word "brother" conjured up so vividly the reality of my position with him, that I spoke fast and passionately.

" Not my brother yet; and, if I can help it, *never!* I love Avice, and have filled a mother's place to her all her life; and I cannot see her drifting into deceit and misery without stretching out a saving hand. Avice does not love *you*; she loves another!" I asserted boldly and unflinchingly, in resolute tones that were steadied by the visible starting of his frame, and the sudden blanching of his face as my avowal met his ear.

" Avice does not love me!" he repeated, slowly passing his hand over his forehead in a bewildered way. " Why did she accept me for her husband, then?"

"Do you not know the Conyers' character, Mr. Dillon? Are you ignorant that, if we *have* hearts at all, pride, arrogance, and ambition fill them; that love is a very secondary consideration indeed? Avice will become your wife, but it will be for the sake of your well-known coffers, for the purpose of bearing a name as old and honoured as our own. She loves her cousin, and has loved him all her life; but a foreigner and a poor artist, Amadeo Ferrari, is no fit mate for Avice Conyers!"

We walked to and fro, I speaking; but the silence of the grave was upon him. I could see that a shadow was upon his downcast face; but it might have been only that the evening was deepening fast.

As I glanced upwards, even the few stars that glimmered faintly down through the interlaced boughs gave a saddened light; and with my deceitful tongue and flushed cheeks, the pure white petals of the innocent flowers that grew in my path were a terrible contrast

Then, of a sudden, Angus caught my hands, and I thanked God that his grasp was firm. He could not love her so utterly as I had feared, if my words had failed to hurt him as deeply as I thought.

"Maude," he said, and his voice, though scarcely audible, was soft and kind, "I thank you for having opened my eyes before it was too late. Poor little Avice! poor child! her happiness shall not be sacrificed to anything so shadowy as pride and ambition. But forgive me, Maude, if I ask for some proof of your words before I can put away from me entirely the only ray of sunshine that my life has known for long. You *may* be mistaken, Maude!"

I shook my head: the ring in his tone was so sor-



rowful that it angered me. In a trice my prolific brain planned what would be sufficient proof for him.

"You must consent to be an eavesdropper, then, at eight o'clock to-morrow night. Be near the tree that stands beside the old stone balcony, and you shall have the proof you require," I whispered eagerly.

He said no single word in reply, but I knew that he would be there. In another minute he turned away, and stood self-absorbed and oblivious of my very presence. So I quietly went home, and left him alone with the trees and the pale stars.

I went on my way slowly through the deep solitude of the forest, and the noble trees appeared in my heated imagination to look contemptuously down on the mean and pitiful thing I was.

Down by the purling water the tall grass nodded backwards and forwards slothfully; upon eddying ripples errant moonbeams danced and played; and across the path crept ancient ivy, clasping in its coils the little wild flowers that bestrewed the ground; but my eyes and brain, heavy and hot, full of the diabolism of passion and revenge, marked no beauty in the scene.

I entered the Castle as stealthily as a thief, in the hope of encountering none of its inmates. My frame of mind was not one for sociability; but, in spite of my efforts to escape unmolested to my own room, I fell upon Avice, wandering like a restless spirit through the gloomy and semi-lighted corridor.

She looked even whiter than was her wont, and her blue eyes wore an anxious expression. I divined at once, with the jealousy of love, that Angus Dillon's unusual absence was the cause of her evident suffering. I tried to pass her, but she put her hand quietly on

my shoulder to detain my rapid steps, and spoke to me in a piteous tone.

"Angus has not been here at all this evening—What *can* have prevented his coming, Maude?"

"How should *I* know?" I answered curtly, shaking off her clasp roughly; her little palm seemed to burn like hot iron through my sleeve into my very flesh.

She looked up deprecatingly into my face; but I turned mine away quickly from her. I was hard and wicked; but I could not bring myself to meet the pure innocent light of her eyes without shrinking.

"I am very tired, Avice. Good-night!" I said, as softly as I could.

"Kiss me, Maude!"

And she lifted up a mouth red and pouting like a child's; but avoiding it and forcing a laugh I sped hastily up the stairs, thankful that that Judas's kiss was not added to my sins.

Early in the day I sought out my cousin, and told him no farther time was to be lost in pressing his suit. I bade him tell Avice that very night of his love; and only too eager to hear from her lips an avowal of reciprocity, he promised to obey all my injunctions implicitly.

A large balcony was thrown out of the western wing of the Castle. Its carved pilasters were covered with trails of wild roses, and it was sheltered at one end by a gigantic oak.

It was a very pleasant place when the sun had sunk to his rest; and it had long been our habit to adjourn to it after the evening meal. Leaving Sir Hildebrand and Amadeo to their wine-cups, my sister and I resorted there as usual.

We were both silent, as we sat watching the shadows

deepening above the high tree-tops, and the stars peeping out one by one faint and pale in the clear grey sky.

Then the Castle clock striking eight roused me out of an evil reverie, and glancing eagerly into the dusk, I saw a tall figure glide slowly into its hiding-place behind the oak. In another moment the seat I left was occupied by Amadeo ; while I stood near, concealed by a large orange-tree, that adorned a corner of the balcony.

My heart beat loud and fast with hope and fear, and my breast swelled high with exultation, at the probable success of my infernal scheme.

Amadeo's face was flushed with wine and excitement, and his voice, habitually loud, fell on the quiet air plain and clear, whilst my sister's answers, low and barely audible, almost failed to reach my ear.

"Avice, I love you ! O, Avice, you are my world, my all ! If you leave me for another, I shall never look up again ; I shall die like a dog ! You *do* love me, Avice, do you not ?" he asked with a vehemence that even startled me.

My sister shrank back from his passionate looks and gestures ; and I saw her actually tremble as she murmured faintly—

"Only as a cousin, Amadeo !"

"Avice, Avice, listen to me !" he cried out, and his accents were full of pathos and pleading. "Do not let ambition lead you astray ! There is no life worth having without the real love that can sweeten sorrow and heighten bliss ! You will find no happiness in wedding with one whose only attractions in your eyes are wealth and lineage !"

My sister stared at him aghast, with wide-distended pupils, as if he was mad ; but she never uttered a

word; her love for her affianced husband was far too beautiful and sacred to be avowed boldly to one so distasteful to her as Amadeo Ferrari.

"Avice, hear me swear on my bended knees," and he flung himself down before her, and seized her hands impetuously, "that if you will break your troth with Dillon, and give up the riches and position you desire, I will be your very slave; worshipped as woman ~~was~~ never worshipped before, your slightest word will be my law, your smile my heaven! Avice, my own, ~~my~~ love! say you will be mine!"

And he clasped her tightly in his arms, and with maniacal energy showered kisses upon her face, unresisted and unrebuked. My sister had swooned.

I saw the cavedropper behind the tree steal noiselessly away into the darkness, and I knew that my fiendish work was done, that Avice Conyers would never be Avice Dillon.

A letter came—but a few cold words—praying her pardon for his fickleness, and telling her that when that letter reached its destination its writer would be no longer on English soil. She read the cruel missive slowly, twice, thrice; then she put it quietly out of sight.

The words had struck her to the heart; but she never uttered a cry or murmur. With the kisses he had pressed on her lips he had implanted in her bosom a love and faith unspeakable, and nothing could have made her impute to him one false word or foul action. Weary unto death were the long summer days after her lover had deserted her; she remained passive to her fate; but she seemed to coil up like the leaf of a flower, and to fade and fade as the time grew on.

It was in just such bright days, when Nature had

en lavish of her smiles, the wild birds had carolled
ily, and the water of the distant Channel had sparkled
like gold in the rays, that Avice, full of life and
pe, had wandered hand in hand with the man whom
e loved with an undying love; and now she was
ere before me in a low chair, with the light falling
on her, showing up the thin outline of her face, as
e rocked herself slowly backwards and forwards, with
r attenuated hands clenched together, and a sad
peless look in her eyes.

Day after day I watched her changing features,
r nervously twining fingers; I noted her quickened
ath, and listened to the voice that strove bravely
t vainly to ring out firm just for the sake of the
nyers' pride; yet I never wavered in my purpose.
Nothing but the spirit of a demon could have lace-
ed that poor little heart—have borne the sight of
t suffering girl.

No other eye but mine could have marked unmoved
visible drooping of her form, or have witnessed
hout remorse the awful and unnatural calm she
d to show. But loyalty, honour—all had deserted
. I *could* not stretch out a hand to save a life that
between me and *him*. And without opening my
jured lips, I saw Avice laid in the great black
ult, just when the spring was come, and pure white
ssoms were decking the hedges.

PART IV.

DER the horror of my sister's untimely death
madeo's excitable mind gave way.

I noted the glare of insanity in his eyes, and the

wild working of his features, when, forcing himself into the room where the dead girl lay, he threw himself upon her coffin, showering kisses and tears upon its senseless lid.

When she was borne away to her last home, he stood white and motionless as a statue, while a terrible vacant look overspread his face; then, springing into the air like a wild beast, he fell to the ground in strong convulsions. For weeks he remained a close prisoner—under the surveillance of an aged retainer of the family—harmless, but mad. He would pace up and down for hours, muttering incoherently fragments of poetry; or else putting delicate tender touches to a half-finished portrait of Avice, which he had begun just after her first meeting with Dillon, when she was in the zenith of her beauty and health. It was piteous to watch him leaning fondly over the picture, as though it had been a living thing, or kneeling before it reverentially with clasped hands, murmuring to it love-words or prayers.

He scarcely tasted meat or drink, or knew what it was to sleep; for the feverish snatches that nature exacted were not slumber; and he would start up from them, with his black eyes flashing fierce, and a deep red spot gleaming on his sunken cheek.

Then he began to grow "dangerous," and I saw him—pinioned and helpless—taken away, beneath the eye of a professional keeper, to a madhouse. This, too, was *my* work! And yet I lived on, without remorse or agony making of my breast a hell. Nay, joy and hope alone filled it—for *he* was coming back!

It were bootless now to enter into all the wiles and stratagems I employed to meet Angus Dillon on his return home.

Suffice it to say, that woman's wits were not taxed in vain, and that scarcely a day passed without my looking upon him.

None who read this record of my life can feel sympathy with such a fiend in human form as I was, or refrain from sickening at the success that crowned my sinful plans. The victory I had perilled my soul to achieve was gained; and in spite of everything, happiness and fullest content were mine.

My God! I loved him so, that to win him for my very own I felt that I would have waded through rivers of human blood. And, ah! was there ever a moon so full of glorious light as the one that flooded the earth and sky, with Angus Dillon standing beneath its tender radiance, my hand in his, and I—Maude Conyers—Angus Dillon's affianced wife!

* * * * *

But my husband never really loved me, though he was kind and gentle.

With my great passionate heart lavishing every feeling at his feet, with my thirsting soul craving daily, hourly, for the true love which alone could satisfy me, the calm affection he gave me was torture and living death. When my glance went up fondly towards him, it met with no return; when my hand clung to his in fervour, I had no responsive pressure. Like a poor bird beating its wings vainly against the hard iron bars of its cage, my spirit dashed violently, but hopelessly, against the barrier of ice that seemed ever to stand between him and me.

I was thoroughly helpless now; no vile plots or false and specious words could avail further—not even the sacrifice of more human lives on the altar of a

mad and erring love could infuse warmth into a heart—that I knew full well was dead to me.

A child was born—a boy—the heir to Conyers and to Dillon Grange.

As I bent over my first-born, the old, old pride swelled high in my bosom, and I forgot my own griefs in the dreams of a glorious future for him. My son would be rich and powerful, the noblest scion of a noble race. Carrying him in my arms, I would wander out, my eyes resting gladly on the proud domains, each leaf and tree of which would be his own, and all the while my foolish lips would babble to baby ears of pride and vaingloriousness. And the child grew and flourished, and was beautiful to look upon; but I loved it most, not for its beauty or its winning ways, but because its birth had brought me what I had plotted and sinned for—one clasp in my husband's arms, one earnest pressure of his lips against my own.

We had our home in Devon until Sir Hildebrand's or Hugh Dillon's death should occur. A quiet and lovely home, of which mutual love would have created an earthly paradise, and I *was* happy there, in spite of the frequent absences that Angus made. My husband had an old schoolmate called Philip Chetwode, and the two were wont to cruise for weeks and weeks together in a yacht that Chetwode owned, leaving me with no companion but my child. Three years had passed away since I had stood at the altar with Angus, and custom had habituated me to solitude; but I was never quite alone; for *his* face was ever beside me, and the tones of his voice, cold and passionless as they were, never left my ear.

It was a brilliant day in summer time, too brilliant to be passed within four walls; so, with the old long-

ing for air and freedom, I sallied out, taking the child with me. I lay hour after hour on the cool green turf, under the shade of a wide-spreading cedar, with the soft wind in grateful breaths lifting my heavy black braids off my temples, and with my eyes dreamily following the movements of the boy as he essayed to chase the little yellow butterflies that hovered low over the perfumed flower-beds.

I felt happier than usual and more hopeful, and the past, with its sins and sorrows, had faded out of view for a while. My husband was coming back to me, for the yacht *Sylphide*, having suffered in a gale, needed repairs.

The day wore on, and the sun became more fervid in his rays, and thinking to find more coolness within doors, I rose up lazily from my grassy couch, and catching the child in his gambols, I sauntered home.

A letter lay on the table, and fancying it was from my husband, I seized it hastily; but it was *to* him, and not *from* him.

I turned the missive round and round in my cold hand, that the thin blue paper seemed to burn like living coals of fire. I examined the little wavering writing, until the peculiar undecided caligraphy grew distorted and almost illegible.

The sight of that foreign letter racked my breast with a thousand fears, making my brain dizzy, and my face whiten, and my breath come short and hard.

What could it be? I wondered. It looked like a woman's writing. The next minute, outraging all the delicacy and honour I owed my husband, the letter (in the French language) lay open before me.

“ANGUS, MY BELOVED,—Though you must have believed me dead long ago, yet Heaven grant that

your heart has not forgotten me! I was one of the few that escaped when the *Louise* was lost off a wild and uncivilized coast.

"I have lived, Angus, through illness and madness, hardship and miserable poverty, in the blessed hope of looking upon you once again.

"I am not quite alone, for a little one who has your eyes and smile is on my knee while I write. I pray God this will reach you. I have no money to go to you; but lose no time in coming to your own wife,

CAMILLE DILLON."

My sin had found me out. Love and pride were swept out of my grasp at one fell blow. A Conyers had fallen lower than the lowest, for I was no wife after all. He for whom I had lost my hopes of heaven was the husband of another woman, and my child was—nameless!

Oh, God! oh, God! With that dreadful, *dreadful* thought running through my brain, I felt as if I was going mad. I only realized that I could stay no longer beneath that roof without perpetrating a farther sin. I only had one desire left, and that was to hide my shame from all.

I read that fatal letter all through again, spelling each cruel syllable, and then I put it in a cover, and added to it one word—"Farewell." Who could surmise that each letter that formed that little word was a dagger thrust in a human heart?

I went up slowly to my room—*our* room—and looked around at each familiar thing; and with the fragrance of the jasmine stars that grew against the window, a deadly faintness stole over me, causing me to reel and stagger like a drunkard.

Then in a few minutes gathering together all the

nerve and calmness I possessed, I placed under lock and key the gems and glittering luxuries that Angus had given me. They were not mine, for they had been lavished on his wife.

I bade a long, long good-bye to the home in which the only happy hours I had ever known had been passed, and wrapping a dark shawl over my shoulders, and taking my child in my arms, I crawled slowly away, like the contemptible pitiable thing that I was, sheltered from view by the friendly dusk.

Crept on and on, with trembling knees and a broken heart, weary and footsore, late into the night, shunning vigilantly the dreaded gaze of human eyes.

I and my child—a second Hagar and Ishmael—homeless, friendless, and nameless!

Down upon my knees on the cold earth, with the sleeping boy clasped close to my breast, beneath the holy light of the stars, I prayed with all my strength for death to come to both.

But time for repentance was vouchsafed, that my miserable soul, purged by affliction, might be more fit for the boon it so earnestly desired.

* * * * *

The *Sylphide* was lost, and he whom I had so loved was drowned, and that fatal letter never met his gaze.

Old Hugh Dillon did not long survive his son; and Dillon Grange, with its proud trees and wide domain belongs to that child across the seas “whose eyes and smile are like his father’s,” whilst *my* boy owns no earthly possession—no, not even a name!

Here on a sea-girt shore I pass the lonely days; but at night, with the murmur of the waves that rocked him to his last long sleep, I hear *his* voice once again in my dreams.



THE CURSE OF TYRRELL.

IT was down in Devonshire, the county of counties, where the skies are so blue and the pastures so green, and where, of a truth, coquettish Dame Nature appears ever to don her loveliest garb to please the eye, that in the summer of 1871 I located myself for an indefinite period, the brevity or the length of which was solely dependent on my inclination, in one of the prettiest and cosiest of those godsendings to pedestrian tourists, wayside inns.

One of those enigmas in humanity, yclept a St. James's-street loungeur, whose "crawls" are ordinarily confined to that patrician but circumscribed ground that lies between Piccadilly and Pall-mall, could in nowise sympathise with the rhapsodies that I poured out upon the little oasis on which I had accidentally dropped, or comprehend the real treats that were to be discovered in my rural paradise. But no matter! All those who possess healthy tastes and proper notions of genuine comfort and quiet contentment would assuredly have participated in my sentiment, without dubbing me a romantic blockhead.

The inn was quite a gem in its way, presenting a quaint mixture of the picturesque and the eccentric.

It was long and low, with all sorts of juttings here and there, that were not meant to afford any especial convenience, as far as one could perceive, but which were simply vagaries in some builder, who evidently held to the opinion that "irregularity is the line of beauty." The walls were of plaster, and the thatched roof sloped with a good deal of decision in its incline, while chimneys, top-heavy and rakish looking, surmounted it.

Heavy trails of some hardy parasite, the name of which was beyond the pale of my botanical knowledge, clung to the front of the house, covering it almost from base to summit, and forming thick emerald frames for the square diamond-paned windows; and from the mass of green tendrils, clusters of pale yellow honeysuckle and white-faced jasmine hung out. There was an old porch too, roughly put together; and within its recess a rude chair, whose wide arms embraced you with so soothing and subtle a charm about them, that it must have been dedicated to the service of the god Morpheus from the hour of its manufacture.

The interior of the inn was decidedly dollish in dimensions, but as bright and clean as a brand-new shilling; and a perfect wilderness of homely flowers obtruded their heads into the rooms, and forced the fact of their sweet existence into your very nose. Being of Goldsmith's opinion, that

"Man wants but little here below,
Nor wants that little long,"

I was as happy as a king, with my trim and cherry-cheeked hostess adroitly administering to my simple requirements, and with no intruder on my agreeable

solitude but the pert sparrows that, with an astonishing hardihood that a London sparrow never attained, hopped familiarly on to my table, and helped themselves uninvited to the stray crumbs.

My only companions were my drawing-materials. An artist—not amateur, but “very much” professional, seeing that I gained my livelihood by the labour of my hands—my sketch-book was of necessity my *vade-mecum*; and in the lovely locality which I had found there were no lack of glorious bits of landscape such as Turner has perpetuated so well, from luxuriant forest trees and woody heights, down to exquisite little hollows, the beauty of which was worthy of being transmitted to paper by fingers infinitely more skilful than my own.

Several country seats were in the neighbourhood, that I kept in reserve for later labours, and the principal one of them, a superb and palatial pile called Tyrrell Court, removed about a league from my door, was the show place of the county.

It was on a sultry and cloudless morning, towards the end of the dog-days, that I stood, *not* a Peri, but a suppliant with a portfolio under my arm, at the gate of the Court.

A medium-sized lodge of gothic architecture was just within it, but so imbedded in foliage that its existence might easily have escaped notice. A broad avenue of century-old chestnuts led as straight as an arrow up to the great mansion, and on either side of the carriage-road, upon the undulating pasture land, tall trees were grouped together, beneath whose cool shadow some heads of stately deer browsed quietly; and in my vicinity, a rare sight to a Londoner’s eyes, a brace or so of pheasants with glossy plumage,

disturbed by my footfall, started upon the wing. Knocking gently at the door of the lodge, I begged permission of the portly dame who answered my summons, to inspect the Court and its vast grounds. My request was granted at once with an urbane courtesy, and taking down a great bunch of keys, she trotted along by my side.

We walked through a formal Italian garden and up the wide steps, that were guarded on either side by huge stone lions couchant, into innumerable saloons that were literally piled up with priceless articles of *virtù*, and hung with rich arras that was supposed to have belonged to good Queen Elizabeth; but bestowing only a cursory glance around at the worm-eaten tapestry and faded splendour, my companion and I proceeded to the great picture-gallery, where the physiognomies of dead Tyrrells for several generations looked down upon our intrusion, some with smiling lips, and some with sinister brows.

Mad upon art, I lingered long and admiringly over each good painting, with the glib prattle of my cicerone falling unheeded on my ears. Suddenly my gaze was caught and arrested by the portraits of two men, that were suspended side by side in heavy gilt frames.

The costume of both was that which used to be worn by the English gentleman in the seventeenth century: the powdered hair, the inevitable queue, and the point-lace shirt frills and ruffles. Both men were in the prime of life, and the faces resembled each other strongly in every feature, but were strangely dissimilar in expression.

"Ah, sir, I see that, like all other visitors to the gallery, your notice is attracted by those two pictures,"

remarked the dame with an air of mystery that at once aroused in me a keen feeling of curiosity.

"Yes, I am struck by the strange likeness and yet extraordinary difference that exists between the two faces. Brothers, I presume? Is there any story connected with those portraits?" I questioned, prepared to listen to some highly-flavoured sensational legend, such as is usually attached to some one particular picture in every show gallery; a concoction invented for the edification of some mystery-loving tourist, and to elicit an extra *douceur* for the narrator. I recollect once, when visiting the church of San Giovanni at Malta, the guide relating the history of the buried knights, amounting to ten pages of catalogue, in the space of ten minutes, without a single stop, and all for the sum of a quarter of a dollar. My unworthy scepticism in the Tyrrell gallery was, however, slightly damped, as, glancing furtively at the lodge-keeper, I could not help perceiving that her appearance was infinitely superior to her station in life, and not in the very least after the type of the ordinary run of bear-leaders.

"Those likenesses are of Rupert and Alf Tyrrell, the only sons of that Tyrrell whose portrait hangs just above;" and she pointed to a countenance with handsome massive features enframed in long white hair that flowed over a courtier's ruby velvet doublet. "There was but two years' difference in their ages, but a vast difference in their dispositions and tempers. According to the family annals, Rupert was of a gentle and yielding spirit, and mild in manner and language, but Alf was a very devil, at least, so say the family annals," she added, apologetically, fancying, without

doubt, that the forcible expression she had used might surprise me.

"And forsooth he looks like one," I answered, reassuringly, "while the other has the face of an angel."

"Well, sir, as you are aware, in the olden days the gentry were more given to outdoor sports than they are now; and those two brothers loved hunting and shooting and fishing, and passed three parts of their lives in such pursuits. One day, when they were returning hot and weary after many hours spent in violent exercise, they met an old gipsy crone, unsightly and withered both in face and form.

"Cross my palm with a little bit of silver, and I will tell thee thy fortune, my fair gentleman," she cried in whining accents to Rupert; and he, with the genial smile and pleasant way that he always had with him, gave her a shining coin, and placed his white patrician hand in her tawny and shaking grasp. The woman surveyed the lines that traversed it for a minute or so, and then she looked up into his bright blue eyes and marked the winsome curve of his mouth. She let drop his hand, while a dark shade passed over her furrowed brow, but she never uttered a single word.

"'Tis a vile old impostor!" exclaimed Alf, impatient to go on his way. "A fool and his money are soon parted, they say; and, Rupert, you do not deserve the heritage of our rich coffers, when you throw away even a paltry piece on such a horrible type of humanity as that. By my father's beard, she should be strangled at once, or burnt for a witch!"

"The old gipsy glared round on him as he gave breath to his taunts, while her deep-sunken eyes gleamed with fire, like lights in the head of a skeleton.

“ ‘ No vile impostor or witch, but a truthful seer of fortunes ; and, to prove it, I’ll tell you *your* fate, young sir. Would that this pretty gentleman’s life was not entwined with yours,’ she added in a plaintive tone as she cast a pitying look towards Rupert. Then in a trice her voice changed, and seizing Alf’s hand before he could move away, she hissed out—

“ ‘ List ye to the Tyrrell curse :
If two brothers ever nurse
Love for the same maiden,
One brother in his prime shall die ;
The other on his bed shall lie,
With pain and misery laden ;’

and flinging away his palm with vehemence, she hobbled out of sight as quickly as her tottering limbs could carry her.

“ Rupert and Alf, with pallid cheeks, glanced at each other as the evil prophecy met their ears. Neither spoke, but in the heart of each rose up the memory of a name, a name that *both* loved—that of ‘ Gwendoline.’ ”

“ A tragic-sounding adventure, indeed,” quoth I, slightly amused at the serious expression of my companion’s face. “ But probably only an unpleasant adventure, and with no results.”

“ Sir, the wicked gipsy’s prediction was but too surely fulfilled, and the curse she pronounced fell not only upon Rupert and Alf Tyrrell, but upon their descendants. Have you never heard rumours of the dark shadow that hangs over this place ? ” she asked in a hushed but impressive tone, as though fearful lest the inanimate images around would frown upon her indiscreet garrulity.

I shook my head gravely ; her awe was positively

ectious, and I caught myself looking uneasily
ound the huge and dreary chamber, against the tall
ndows of which the twigs outside were slowly
pping like so many ghosts.

"I could not bring myself to relate the tale here
th so many of the family around ; but if you would
se to hear it, sir, and will come to the lodge to-
morrow, I am sure I shall be only too proud to give
ou any information I can," she said in suave accents,
moothing her white apron the while.

Assenting gladly to her proposition, and with, I
onestly avow, a keen liking for all stories that
avoured of the "thrilling," I called on the morrow,
and heard from her the tale which, in my poor way,
I shall endeavour to put on paper.

PART I.

It was on a bright spring morning in the year of our
Lord 1830, that the bells from the tower of an ancient
church pealed out loudly and merrily, in order to
commemorate the marriage day of the owner of
Tyrrell Court ; and this Sir Rupert Tyrrell, in his
prime, was as noble and handsome a specimen of
manhood as eyes could look upon.

He was over six feet in height, with stalwart
boulders and muscular limbs, and he moved with a
saughty gait, as though he were fully conscious of his
high position and lengthy pedigree. His face, after
the Tyrrell type, was as fair complexioned and as
nely chiselled as a woman's, and his eyes were clear
and frank like a child's, and as blue as the skies ; yet
no trace of effeminacy dwelt upon his features, for the

long, heavy, flaxen-hued moustache drooped over lips that were so firmly cut and so full of strength, that they lent a stamp of decision to the rest of his countenance. Looking upon him, as he stood on the threshold of his home, with the sunlight falling upon him, acknowledging bareheaded the greeting of his retainers, the most fastidious could scarcely have marvelled that he had succeeded in winning for himself the heart and hand of the loveliest maiden in all the shire. And none who watched the deep love-light in his eyes, and marked the tender smile that hovered upon his mouth whenever his gaze went towards his wife, could have been sceptical of *how* dear she was to him.

The Lady Alice was the only daughter of a duke; but although she owned an ancestry that was far nobler than that of the Tyrrells, she was so humble and lowly in the very midst of her love, that she was wont to wonder at the infinite bliss that had fallen upon her, while she deemed the priceless boon of her husband's hand a fit gift for royalty alone. A village girl could not have yielded up to her rustic swain a devotion more pure, more simple, and so utter, than the fair patrician gave to the suitor who came to the ducal halls with "vassals and serfs at his side," but who in spite of his lineage and knowledge of the great world, returned her affection with all the honesty and genuine warmth of a country squire, whose feelings "*society*" had neither spoiled nor blunted.

Tyrrell Court was an earthly paradise to the two; and when the clatter of tiny feet, and the merry prattle of childish lips resounded in the splendid saloons and galleries, Sir Rupert desired nothing more to complete his content. But it is when the cup of bliss overflows,

that "Death loves a shining mark—a signal below!"

When Rupert, the elder boy, was three years of age, and Alf but a twelvemonth old, the Lady Alice died; died suddenly while sitting beside her husband one quiet summer's eve, with her arm around his neck. In the space of a fleeting breath, the sweet musical laughter was changed into a rigid silence, and the tenderness in her eyes was gone out from them for ever and aye; but even in death, her head, falling forwards, rested upon her husband's breast, and her embrace enclosed him still.

She had left him, and he knew it; but there were no witnesses by to note the dumb horror in Sir Rupert's face, to mark the wild glare of dilated eyes, or the terrible quiver of the firm-set mouth from which no cry issued. That cry was crushed down by giant force into the very depths of his heart, to live and be heard there for ever, and the ashen hue that crept upon his cheek never left it more. Bending down, he gazed steadily into the beloved face, and taking the cold hands he placed them in his breast, to bring back warmth to them; then after a minute or two, he calmly and quietly raised the slight form, and laid it down reverentially upon the canapé, closing the white lids gently, so as to shut out the awful stare of the eyes, and crossing the fair arms upon the bosom. The evening had closed in, and the shimmering dusk made the features of the dead assume a marble aspect that awed him. He called out loudly, and when his cry was answered, he pointed to the recumbent figure, and hoarsely whispering, "Hush, the Lady Alice sleeps!" he burst into laughter and rushed from the room.

But Sir Rupert became no raving maniac after all;

only a man prematurely old, over-weighted with grief, and lead to all that passed around. His wife had taken with her all of life as it were, for it seemed to him as though the portion of him she had left behind was but a mere droid, devoid of feeling, insensible to every earthly affection. There was but one object on which his eyes ever lingered for a while, and that was the face of his elder born, for it was a prototype of his dead mother's : the same soft features and pearly tints, the sunlit hair, and now and then even the same tone of voice, making Sir Rupert start up from his waking dreams, only to fall back again wearily and hopelessly into the chair in which he was accustomed to sit, brooding perpetually upon the irremediable past.

The Lady Alice and her husband had resembled each other strongly ; but Alf, the younger boy, was unlike either in expression, and his bold black orbs and swarthy cheeks were sights that his father never cared to look upon.

PART II.

RUPERT and Alf Tyrrell grew apace ; but in all the years that elapsed until they arrived at manhood, no parental affection or solicitude watched over their career. Left entirely to themselves, or to the chance guiding of strangers, it would scarcely have been marvellous if the ill weeds that are indigenous in human hearts had choked any stray good seed that Nature's hand might have planted. Notwithstanding the disadvantages of his training, Rupert, however, was noble, unselfish, and of a sweet disposition ; but Alf, as dark in soul as in tint, possessed faults enough for both

faults that might have been eradicated or have died out with the wisdom of riper years, had not a pernicious influence been brought to bear upon them. It was at a public school, to which the brothers were sent, that a young Creole named Louis Denley acquired a power over Alf that worked evil upon him, overthrowing any notions of right, and fostering in their growth the ill passions that a kindly hand might have calmed and quelled; and, worse than all, the Creole incited in Alf a sentiment of unnatural dislike and envy of his elder brother. Denley was a needy adventurer, unprincipled and unscrupulous, and unprepossessing in appearance. Irritated that all his overtures toward Rupert to gain good-will or confidence had proved futile, he harboured a malicious feeling towards him, none the weaker for being kept concealed under a mask of hypocrisy, from motives of diplomacy. An *anguis in herbâ*, he smiled in Rupert's face and stabbed him in the back, never neglecting an opportunity of aggravating the hatred that he had by patient and wily efforts fanned into a fierce flame in Alf's breast. And Rupert, all his life ready and willing to sacrifice everything for Alf's dear sake, watched the Creole's plotting in dismay, but shrank from uttering a reproach. Yet now and then, when he caught a furtive glance from his brother's eyes full of dislike which he could not comprehend, he would try and chase away the idea as a folly that common sense should repudiate at once. He longed to be convinced that an erroneous notion had seized him, and, in the earnest hope that he might elicit a reassuring word, would sometimes allude to the subject that pained him.

"Tell me, Alf, have I vexed you in any way, that you should look at me so angrily as you do some-

times?" he questioned affectionately. A scowl upon Alf's dark brow, and a moody answer ungraciously given, were usually all that he evoked.

"What can it signify to you, or to any one else, how a poor devil of a younger son looks? It is enough to irritate one, I think, that Fortune should have emptied all her good gifts into your lap, and left me nothing but misery and enough money to buy a rope to hang myself with!"

"What on earth do you mean, Alf? Surely you know that whatever I am possessed of I am willing to share with you!"

"Except the title and the full coffers of the Tyrrells," sneered the other. "England is an unjust country, I'll swear. Why should the elder brother engross all, just because Fate brought him a little sooner into the world, while a miserable younger son may starve in a prison, and rot in a pauper's grave? The laws of other nations are reasonable enough, giving equally to all the children. It is only here that 'the heir,' be he fool or blackleg, has everything pleasant heaped upon him, while his betters may beg their daily bread."

"I do not care to think that the 'heir' in our case is such a scamp as your words infer, dear old Alf; but if you and I could change positions, and our doing so would insure your happiness, I should be perfectly willing. Titles and wealth do not constitute by any means my notions of enjoyment; and I believe *you* would not harbour such morbid and unhealthy feelings if it were not for your companionship with that fellow Louis Denley. I candidly avow that I do not like him."



"Nor he you!" laughed Alf, satirically. "There's no love lost between you, I'll be sworn."

Rupert smiled quietly. His disposition was too even to be easily ruffled by looks and nods that would have completely upset the equanimity of a hotter-tempered man.

"Some folks' censure is praise, you know, and Denley's approbation is the last thing I crave for; I may be doing him dire injustice, but I cannot help fancying he has an ulterior motive in trying to incite anger in your breast against me, Alf."

The discussion ended, as all such discussions usually did, by the younger brother turning on his heel with an impatient gesture, while Rupert, ashamed of the emotion, yet dashed away a big drop of wounded feeling from his eye. It appeared to him a weary and futile task to try and evoke kindly sentiments in Alf, and his only hope was in time, which, by removing Denley's power, might bring a little natural affection in one whom he loved with all the warmth and honesty of his nature.

PART III.

AFTER a while Sir Rupert, whose health was failing fast, desired the presence of his sons; though he had never displayed any especial tenderness towards them, he yet wished to have them near him. The house of the Tyrrells, notwithstanding that all the family was gathered within the walls, was far removed from being a lively abode. An indefinable shadow seemed ever to rest upon it, and the sound of happy voices or

resonant laughter appeared entirely out of place in the dreary old rooms and galleries. The Tyrrells, moreover, had never been renowned for their sociable qualities. Ever since the sudden and early death of fair Lady Alice, Sir Rupert had never attempted to sustain even an appearance of hospitality or sociability. He shrank from the task of entertaining strangers; and wrapt up in his own mighty sorrow, the world, with its ostentatious pomps and vanities, had become to him the empty bauble that it in reality is. The gentry around were unknown to Sir Rupert except by name, and his habit was to make a circuit of a mile rather than run the chance of encountering any of his neighbours.

The only visitors at the desolate Court were the old vicar and his only child. The vicar, with his benign features and snowy locks, was the only human being whose gentle voice Sir Rupert listened to patiently and quietly. He was wholly free from cant, and the holy words that fell from his lips, carrying truth with them, had the power sometimes of chasing away the gloom on the baronet's brow, and now and then of even awakening a more hopeful and contented spirit in a breast upon which grief had laid so heavy a hand. Fay Vernon, the vicar's daughter, had been the pet and plaything of both Rupert and Alf Tyrrell when she was a tiny girl, and during the years that had elapsed during their absence from the Court, her beauty had infinitely ripened, and she had grown almost out of their recollection.

Fay, with her small but exquisite proportions, with her delicate Greek profile and nut-brown hair, was attractive to all who looked upon her; and her father was perhaps the most devoted of her admirers, waiting



upon her fancies, and ministering to her manifold whims, almost before she gave expression to them. She was all that was left to him of a wife whom he had worshipped, and upon her he lavished the whole tenderness of his honest heart. It pleased Fay to play the coquette now and then; and assured that she was goodness and purity itself, he allowed her to flit in and out of the Court, just in the same manner as she was wont to do in her own parsonage home. She was the only ray of sunshine that ever penetrated the gloom of Tyrrell, and her presence was welcomed by all its inmates, not excepting the gloomy owner himself.

Louis Denley was a guest of the Court as well. Alf had desired it, and to please him Rupert had preferred the request to his father, who seldom refused a wish of his elder son's. Fay Vernon, albeit of good and gentle nature, was slightly given to antipathies. From the first moment of looking upon Louis Denley she had shrunk from his society; but the Creole, self-satisfied, never noticed her manner, and even pictured to himself the possibility of winning her love, in spite of her steady efforts to avoid him. He fancied that he loved her too, and this lent a greater impetus to his endeavours to force himself continually upon her; but if his feelings had been analysed, it would have been found that a rumour of a heavy dowry in store for Fay Vernon, whose family was one of the best in the county, was the chief motive that actuated his attentions to her.

One summer day, seizing what appeared to him a golden opportunity, Denley surprised her in a secluded path. The girl flushed up over brow and neck. She hated Louis in her own childish impetuous fashion,

and his vicinity always gave her a nervous and unpleasant sensation, which she was too volatile to try and dissect. Enough for her if she succeeded in eluding him. Now, as he approached her, she shrank away from him as far as the width of the path would admit of her doing, walking as fast as her small feet would carry her; but the Creole, utterly unconscious of the aversion written legibly enough upon her features, commenced speaking in the oily accents which she so distrusted and disliked.

"Nay, do not hurry so, Miss Vernon, I beg of you. It is not often that such a happy opportunity is afforded us of being alone together."

She flashed out a wrathful glance at him for his assumption in supposing that such a meeting could in any wise be agreeable or welcome to her; but merely measuring him from head to foot for a moment, with contempt in her pretty eyes, she hurried still faster on her way.

Denley, lacking all delicacy or refinement, placed his hand upon her sleeve to detain her; and losing all patience, she shook off his touch as if it had been a noxious insect, and spoke out loud and passionately.

"What do you mean by intruding yourself on me like this, Mr. Denley? I will thank you to leave me at once."

"Leave you, Miss Vernon? *certainly* not. This is too favourable a moment for speaking to you, and I am not going to let it slip from me. I want to tell you that I admire you more than any woman in the world, and that I love you with all my heart. I come of as noble a stock as your own, and I have estates in Jamaica which would buy up a dozen Tyrrell Courts. I offer you my name and wealth, and I feel certain



that you cannot esteem them paltry gifts; and, Fay, I think, nay I am *sure*, that you love me dearly."

The girl grew hot and cold with intense indignation, while her cheeks turned red and white alternately, and she crushed down the gravel under her tiny heel with a vehemence that astonished her companion; who, wrapt up in a beatific self-confidence and complacency, stood before her, throwing as much pathos into his hard black eyes as he could muster up.

"*Love* you? why, I hate you, and sooner than become your wife, I would gladly lie down in my grave."

The fiery Creole blood mounted up in a moment, as the scorn in her looks and voice became evident to him. He was of a mean and low nature, a bully but a coward, notwithstanding his strong muscular figure and bold face, and even her show of spirit cowed him for a while; but any woman who offended him, or hurt his overweening self-love, became to him at once an object for persecution and insult. He looked round, and saw that he and Fay were quite alone.

"Would you answer Alf Tyrrell like this, if he told you that he loved you?" he asked insolently.

"Any questions that Mr. Alf Tyrrell asked me, and my reply, can in no way concern *you*," she said haughtily, and she tried to walk on.

"Not so fast, if you please," he answered imperiously; and he seized hold of her delicate arm with an iron grasp, while the dark face he bent over her was livid with passion.

"You *shall* tell me what you would say if Alf asked you to marry him."

Fay stood in his strong hold, powerless to move a step until it should please him to release her from

such "durance vile." All her courage was oozing fast, and she threw longing looks around for some signs of protection from her tormentor; but the grounds of Tyrrell Court abounded in lonely and romantic paths and nooks, and no kind face was in sight. From sheer physical fear she thrust down the pride that prompted her to sustain a dignified silence.

"If Alf Tyrrell desired me for a wife, I should have to refuse him, because I do not love him," she faltered low.

"Because you love his brother Rupert, or rather it is the heir of Tyrrell Court that has enchained your affection. Faugh! all your sex are alike; ready to sell themselves, body and soul, for position and wealth. I tell you that it is not Rupert that you care for, but his worldly possessions; and he, poor fool, imagines perhaps that you are simple, and true, and pure. Listen to me: if it had been Alf who had taken your heart from me, I would have spared you; but I *hate* Rupert, and those lips shall not go to meet his pure and untainted!" he shouted almost, holding her still tighter as she struggled to be free. The sweet pink bloom faded right out of her face, and she felt faint and cold; but gathering together all her strength, she gave a loud scream for help. Denley stooped low to close her mouth with the threatened kiss, when a blow dealt on his head laid him on the earth, stunned by the force of the arm that had aimed it.

"Fay, for God's sake tell me what all this means," Rupert questioned angrily. He loved the girl better than his own life, and it maddened him to think that she had been alone with such an unprincipled villain as he believed Louis Denley to be.

Now that protection had arrived, and fear was over,

Fay's thoughts flew back to Denley's innuendoes regarding the nature of her feelings for Rupert. She knew quite well that her heart was his wholly, without any reservation whatever, that no shadow of a mercenary or interested sentiment mingled in her devotion. Rupert Tyrrell bereft of riches and name would have been as dear, nay even dearer to her than as the heir to titles and wealth; and often in her girlish dreams she had pictured a life in a humble cottage, where "love among the roses" was all in all. If a crowned head had besought her favour, Rupert, with naught to recommend him but himself, would have won her hand. But now, as though indifferent to his pleading eyes and tones, she stood leaning against a tree, with her gaze resting upon the senseless figure of Denley; while the thought that if the Creole had given her credit for such unworthy feelings, perchance he whose opinion she valued above everything in the world might do the same, was uppermost in her mind.

Fay was of a proud and sensitive nature, and in order to hide her heart from Rupert's gaze, she strove to place a mask of coldness and nonchalance over it. Still she could not bear that any one should deem her guilty of being willingly alone in so secluded a spot with Denley.

"It was no fault of mine that I was here with that man," she said with a shudder, and her face turned whiter and whiter.

"Fay, you are trembling," cried Rupert, all his wrath and jealousy vanishing in a trice, as he marked the unwonted pallor of her cheek. "The scoundrel, to have frightened you like this! By heaven, he shall account for his conduct when he recovers his consciousness."

Fay Vernon looked up at him as he spoke, and a great fear crept over her lest any danger should befall him. Every hair of his head was precious in her sight. Rupert caught her yearning glance before she could avert her gaze. The next instant all doubt and suspicion had passed, and he was pouring out the feelings she had called up in his breast.

-Child, listen to me! Do not take your eyes from mine: see how truly mine are telling you of the love that fills my whole being! Ever since you were a tiny girl, and used to throw your fairy arms round my neck and lip out 'Good Rupert,' you have been the ruler of my destiny. I never forgot your angel face and your winning ways all the years we were parted: your image, Fay, has never been absent from my memory; and now, that time and absence have proved that mine is no ephemeral love, that to have you for my wife is the blessing I ask from Heaven in each prayer I breathe, do not from any motive blast the happiness that one dear word from you can give. If you love me, Fay, lift up your eyes just once, and let me read your answer there!"

He had overheard Denley's insinuations regarding the girl's feelings, but, truthful and pure-minded himself, he could not harbour ill thoughts of any one, and more especially of one so infinitely dear to him as Fay. He had divined at once that the sudden coldness of her manner towards him arose from wounded pride or delicacy; but the sincere ring in his voice went straight to Fay's heart, and dispersed all fancy on her part that Rupert shared Denley's suspicions. Her soft blue eyes looked up shyly at him as he had desired, and a fervent pressure of her red lips proved his gratitude.

When the Creole recovered his consciousness he found himself alone, and staggering to his feet, he walked slowly to the Court under the shelter of the dusk. He crept into his own room, and hastily putting together his valise, he stole noiselessly through the grounds, and taking the first train, was quickly whirled away from Tyrrell. Rupert's blow had fallen heavily on his craven heart as well as on his head, and he shook with fear at the bare vision of encountering his adversary again; but, nevertheless, he cherished a mortal hatred against him, and his brain was busy with diabolical schemes of revenge against him whose hand had struck him.

PART IV.

It was a very dark hour for Alf Tyrrell when the news of his brother's betrothal to Fay Vernon came to him. He loved her as dearly as his naturally cold and selfish disposition allowed of, and her loss aggravated tenfold the ill-feeling he bore to Rupert. True, he had never breathed his passion to its object, but he had only bided his time for doing so; for an indefinable presentiment hung over him that fortune, ever strange and fickle, would be kinder to him ere long, and that, with the strong aid of wealth, his suit would assuredly be prosperous. He had even avoided Fay at times, in the fear that his real feelings towards her might lead him into speaking prematurely, and thus perchance lose him his cause. But now the knowledge that the girl was lost to him came like a thunderbolt, and roused up a malignity to Rupert the vehemence of which almost frightened himself. For

days he secluded himself in his own chamber, affecting illness as an excuse for his eccentric behaviour, and too proud to let others perceive his true ailment; and then, when solitude appeared to drive him wild, he rode out for hours, leagues distant from the Court, on a horse that none but himself cared to mount. A fiery and vicious animal was the Erl King, with a magnificent coal-black coat, and large wicked eyes that boded mischief, but with paces like the wind; and in Alf's darkest moods, rapid motion and violent exercise seemed the greatest panacea he knew.

Meanwhile the hours were rosy enough to the lovers, until a heavy grief came to Rupert in his father's death. Although there had never been any excess of paternal affection in the old baronet, Rupert loved him well; and the fact of becoming successor to the title was no consolation to him in his bereavement. He cared so little for the world and all the goods that worldly folks desired, that a new lease of life granted to the father whose eyes had been often wont to rest kindly upon him, would have been a real boon to the sorrowing son. But the old man died quietly and peacefully after his long life of trouble, and, according to the habit of Tyrrell, a black flag waved from Tyrrell Church, to let the folks around know the owner of Tyrrell was dead.

Not so Alf. In his breast there was rejoicing that only one life lay now between him and the position he had coveted all his days. His voice was the very last to hail his brother "Sir Rupert;" and Rupert, when he noted the malice and envy in the fraternal congratulations, wished with all his heart that Alf had been the heir instead of himself. Alf loved glitter and gold so much, that it seemed a vagary



of Fate not to have made him the inheritor of Tyrrell.

Alf grew daily more passionate and irritable, until his very presence became a kill-joy to all with whom he came in contact. Fay dreaded his vicinity, and fled when his step was heard; and Rupert, aware that the sight of him added to moroseness that was almost unbearable, strove to keep out of his way.

Until one day, and then, forgiving and tender-hearted as he had ever been, Rupert knelt by his brother's side, wiping the cold dew off the dark brow, while Alf, crushed and crippled, lay as helpless as an infant on his couch. Erl King, the only creature on whom Alf had lavished caresses, as well as blows, maddened by a cruel hit from his reckless rider, had thrown him, and after dragging him some distance, had left him a disfigured and inanimate heap upon the road, where he was discovered by some labourers, and carried back to the Court. It seemed to be a punishment from heaven for the man to whom that heaven was infinitely less dear than the gross earth and all its fading attractions; but Rupert never dreamed of this. He only knew that his brother was before him, a ghastly being with the semblance of life scarcely left on his features; a miserable distorted object, to whom the love of woman was for ever debarred, and one on whom no eyes would ever desire to look, and an intense pity filled his soul.

"Dear Alf, if you only knew how much I grieve for you!" he could not refrain from murmuring as he performed some service for the wretched sufferer.

"Grieve! why should *you* grieve, Sir Rupert? You have Tyrrell, and a fair wife in prospect; think of your own happiness, and leave me alone!" Alf

would mutter angrily, with a malevolent gleam on his face.

Rupert, deeply hurt, would seek out Fay, and with her bright head upon his breast, and her little hand close clasped in his own, forget that aught but infinite and perfect bliss existed in this world. Twelve months had rolled by since his father's death, and in a few more hours Fay was to be his wife and the mistress of Tyrrell Court. Full of fairy visions of the future, Rupert and she parted at the parsonage on the eve of their wedding-day, and Rupert's kiss had lingered longer and more tenderly upon his betrothed's lips, while she had murmured a blessing again and again as her eyes followed his figure, until it was quite lost to view in the gloom of a starless night. Leaning over the rustic gate, loth to leave the spot where she had bidden him good-night, with her heart full of her lover and with his soft tones still upon her ear, Fay was suddenly aroused out of "love's young dream" by icy-cold fingers gripping hard at her arm, while a familiar voice whispered harshly, "To-morrow will bring no wedding!" and ere she could turn towards the evil prophet, a dark form glided quickly out of sight, but not before the girl's trembling mouth had uttered audibly, "The Creole!"

Her heart, but a moment before beating high with hope and happiness, sank within her with terrible misgiving; a cold chill ran through her frame, and with blanched cheeks she entered her home, startling her father, who was at his accustomed studies, by flinging her white arms round his neck and sobbing vehemently on his bosom; and when she had told him all that had occurred, he, believing it was but the work of overwrought fancy, laughed at her fears,

and almost persuaded her into his own view of the matter.

But in the lonely night-watches that low and evil voice kept ringing in her ears ; and as the hour of one told her that the morrow had indeed broken, Fay, unable to rest quietly in her bed, paced her room with rapid strides, wringing her little hands, and calling on Rupert's name. She felt as though each moment that must elapse ere they met again in the church which they would leave as "one," would seem to her like hours, so much fear and anxiety was in her mind. Then as the morn grew on, Fay's bridesmaids came to deck her in her wedding gear ; but she sat still and white, and almost as cold as a statue, in her bridal dress of satin, such as the future lady of Tyrrell should wear, while they fastened the wreath of orange blossoms into her lustrous hair, and adjusted the long lace veil to shade the blushes on the soft cheek, and the throbbing of the gladsome heart.

But no blushes were tinging Fay Vernon's cheek, no happy pulses were beating beneath her embroidered boddice. Only her lips were quivering and pale, and her fingers twitched nervously in her lap ; and the bridesmaids, alarmed at the aspect she wore, halted in the task. Then suddenly there fell upon their ears the sound of the deep-toned bell from the belfry of Tyrrell Church. No merry marriage peal, but tolling, tolling, solemn and slow ; tolling for a soul that was fled.

Fay started to her feet, flinging her arms over her head, and with the light of madness in her eyes. Throwing open her window wide, she gazed out wildly, as though searching for something. *It was there !* On Darrell Church the great black flag waved in the

morning light, and with one piercing shriek she fell senseless to the ground.

Eight days after, the poor old vicar bent broken-hearted over his dead child—for Fay, never recovering consciousness, had quickly passed away from life in delirium, with her parched lips ever murmuring, "To-morrow will bring no wedding;" and while he mourned, the bells of Tyrrell Church chimed out loudly, proclaiming that the miserable cripple Alf was master of the broad domains, Sir Alf Tyrrell, of Tyrrell Court; for Rupert, found murdered on the morning of his marriage-day in Tyrrell Woods, lay side by side with his ancestors in the gloomy family vault, and the only mouth that could have brought the foul assassin to justice was closed by the hand of death. Thus it was that the old gipsy's prophecy was but too truly fulfilled.

"List ye to the Tyrrell curse:
If two brothers ever nurse
Love for the same maiden,
One brother in his prime shall die;
The other on his bed shall lie,
With pain and misery laden."





AN EPISODE OF THE EAST.

"Valour is certainly going! it is sneaking off! I feel it oozing out, as it were at the palms of my hands."—SHERIDAN.



TAID English folks, whose peregrinations have either been confined to the limits of the "United Kingdom," or have never extended beyond the ordinary continental resorts of John Bull during the season of excursion and return tickets, and who have never set eyes on ferocious "beasts of prey," excepting in show caravans on provincial tours, or in the menagerie in the Zoological Gardens, would barely credit the hair-breadth escapes that beset the life of a resident in the Orient. And yet singular and unpleasant episodes do occur very frequently to flavour with a startling and sometimes very unpalatable piquancy the monotonous routine of Anglo-Indian existence. There is no doubt that a "King of the Forest," superb in his strength, chafing within his iron prison-house, bounding with lithe free motion high up in air, or crouching low, with his eyes all aflame and his ears levelled even with his magnificent head, as though he were in the very act of settling down upon his victim, may be an attractive sight to a bystander, more especially if he be a zoographer; but those who have found themselves

at any period of their lives in obnoxious juxtaposition to the brute in question, and have endured the knowledge that little or no barrier of defence existed from very close proximity to his terrible and cruel jaws, can hardly regard his species without a nervous and uncomfortable sensation.

The adventure I am about to relate occurred some dozen years ago ; but the scene is so vivid in my mind that I can scarcely believe so long a time has elapsed. It was an adventure exciting and sensational, but to a recurrence of which I should be extremely averse. I recollect how brightly the heavens were studded over with countless stars, that shone down with a clear radiance that belongs especially to hot climes, turning night into day, and leaving no desire for the appearance of "chaste Dian" amongst her brilliant satellites. According to Indian custom, the evening meal had been taken long after sundown ; and it was striking a quarter to midnight when I and another lady, bidding farewell to numerous friends, started on our route "down the country"—*vide* Anglo-Indian phraseology. Trains were not the mode of locomotion in those days ; and only about twenty miles of rail—from Calcutta to a French settlement called Serampore—had been accomplished, under the difficulties of the monsoon and the fierce meridian sun, by the army of civil engineers, who had flocked eastward on the first rumour of railway employment being afloat.

My friend and I, attired in loose morning wrappers, reclined comfortably at full length in the commodious "palanquins" that everybody has heard of. On a shelf above our feet were the usual provisions for such a journey—wine, biscuits, and a big vial of laudanum or ginger ; travellers in India bearing in mind that an



attack of cholera, or some such ghostly visitant, might easily present itself amidst the forests, many a mile distant from medical aid, or even from any European habitation.

Side by side we jolted along with the ordinary monotonous "grunt" of the men who carried us. We were transported so evenly and in such close vicinity that we were enabled to chat comfortably together. On the outer side of our conveyances the "Masāl-wallahs" flourished their torches aloft, renovating the light continually by drops of oil from a rude sort of pipkin, and appearing themselves, in their half-nude figures and ebon physiognomies, the impersonation of those horrible hobgoblins that are held in terrorem over children's heads in the nursery. On we went through the brushwood, over sandy plains, beneath luxuriant mango-topes, between vistas of fragrant baūbal, crushing down ruthlessly fields of the green grain, intersected by nettles, wading through ditches of water, and never halting on our steady progress, save for a few seconds, to allow of a change in the shoulders of our human beasts of burden. Every five miles of our journey, out of the gradually deepening darkness of the night, loomed the dusky forms of the "relay," emerging weird-like and fantastic from some tumble-down "serai," or roadside inn, with hubblebubbles in hand, and sleep heavy on their lids.

At length the brushwood began to grow taller and taller, the boughs of trees struck against the palanquins as we passed, the feet of the bearers glided with a rustle through the long tangled grass, and the light from the stars grew dimmer each moment as the thick foliage of the jungle met in a canopy overhead ;

and our carriers, fatigued, forgot to replenish the oil of the torches, that burnt gradually more and more faintly. Sleep overcame us as well; and my friend and I were fast falling into the arms of Morpheus, when, all of a sudden, down went our conveyances, touching each other with an awful "thud" on the hard ground; and shrieking out "Säär" (tiger), the cowardly natives, leaving us to our fate, scampered off as quickly as their legs could take them into the pervading gloom. Our first instinct of preservation was to bang to the outer doors of our fragile fort and double-lock them; our next action was to clasp on another's hands and send up a prayer to Providence for our safety. Breathless we sat, straining each nerve to catch each trivial sound, and not daring to speak one word of mutual comfort or hope.

Round the palanquins the animal kept stalking like a sentinel, with a measured tread, switching his heavy tail against the door, and doubtlessly scenting the dainty fare that awaited, in indescribable agony, the success of his efforts to arrive at it. Then his movements became more energetic, and we heard him grating himself against the sides; and then, all of a sudden he seemed to spring and fall heavily on the roof of our paltry stronghold. Oh, who could describe the terror that we felt! and each minute that lagged on its course seemed to lengthen into hours, or even days. What on earth was to become of us we knew not; deserted by our attendants in the midst of the thickest jungle, and with no apparent means of escape from the bloodthirsty brute, who never appeared to weary of his efforts to force himself through our brittle walls. Supposing the natives did not return to us, of food we had a paucity, and the small supply of

water we had brought had already been used to assuage the thirst of a sultry night of the Indian summer. We dared not even open an aperture to the extent of an inch, that we might inhale a breath of air, for horror of confronting our deadly enemy. Fear and suspense grew each instant more insupportable, and firmer we held each other's hands; while big beads of perspiration gathered on our brows, and the loud beating of our hearts was audible in the awful silence that we kept. And still the time wore on, with no sign of succour.

A tiny streak of light glimmered suddenly between the roofs of the two palanquins, and we knew that the dawn was breaking with a soft roseate hue, and was peeping down upon our distress through the narrow interstices of the branches that were tightly interlaced together above. And with the first glimmer of day, hoarse unearthly yells resounded close by; and thinking that all the wild beasts of the forest had broken loose upon us, we gave ourselves up for dead women.

Then the light grew blood-red, as, with a fearful jerk, the palanquins were pulled asunder; and we believed for an instant that we had descended into the infernal regions, as the torches glared brightly into our eyes and fell on the scared faces and uncouth gestures of the dastardly bearers, who had returned at last, accompanied by a score of wild-looking villagers, brandishing huge sticks on high, and vociferously acquainting us that the tiger had bolted, and we were safe.



THE MARQUISE DE L'ORME.

REGARDLESS of her trailing satin and lace, and oblivious of the presence of guests in her chateau, Madame la Marquise leant back carelessly in a fauteuil in her boudoir. Her ripe rich beauty was heightened by the crimson of southern roses that flushed her cheek, and by the soft languor that filled her star-like eyes.

"He loves me! he loves me not! he loves me!" she murmured at length in an exultant tone, as she broke off the last white petal of a Marguerite, and flung the stalk carelessly on the floor. She was a woman of the world, with no lack of intelligence, and sense and reason both told her that no sentiment warmer than friendliness existed in Henri de Ville's breast towards her; and yet with a curious superstition that is so often attendant on love, the simple German mode of testing affection appeared to bring her hope and comfort; and with a buoyant heart she rose to perform the onerous duties of châtelaine.

The darkness of a starless night hung over the grounds of the ancient Norman chateau, rendering the gloom that pervaded wood and alley almost impenetrable; but the building itself, from summit to

basement, was one blaze of light. The aspect of the place was symbolical of life and death, in the curious contrasts that it presented to the eye; for outside there was shadow and mystery, and inside revelry and the sounds of music. Beneath the dense foliage of the huge patriarchal trees reigned the grave poetry of intense solitude; and under the painted and frescoed ceilings was the "world," with its giddy votaries and its insensate pleasures.

The principal reception-room gave on to a vast vestibule, the portals of which were thrown widely open to admit the summer air; and thus the hosts that had been bidden to the ball by Madame la Marquise, in order to do honour to her fête-day, were visible from the Italian garden that lay in front of the mansion. But, enchanted by the glittering splendour of the entertainment provided for them, the crowd had no thought for the varied beauties of nature that were in close contiguity—the quiet charms of the delicious bosquets and dells, and the sweet song of the nightingale; although the tall trees, freighted heavily with pink and white blossom, lent their subtle fragrance to the breeze, that, stealing gently through the open casements, kissed the hot brows and cheeks of the whirling revellers.

At the fête there were two fair women who divided the attention and adulation of the crowd, and they were Adelaïde, Marquise de l'Orme, and her daughter Hélène. The first, although she was past the pristine bloom and freshness of youth, was yet a magnificent sample of her sex. Above the average height, and stately as a poplar, grace was in every movement of her form. Her features were aquiline, and her almond-shaped eyes, black as night, flashed like jewels,



while with a haughty and regal air she appeared to command homage as her due.

But Hélène, shy and timid as a fawn, seemed desirous of evading, as far as lay in her power, the ardent admiration and notice beneath which her white lids drooped, and her fair young face blushed. The extreme pallor and pensiveness that characterized her countenance evinced a heart that was ill at ease; and whenever her ruby lips essayed to smile, her long jetty lashes fell as though to hide the irrepressible tears. Her beauty was in perfect contrast to her mother's; for while Madame la Marquise's cheek was blooming with health and strength, that of Hélène was as purely and delicately tinted as a sea-shell, and her eyes, wondrously soft, were blue as summer skies. The excessive reserve and melancholy of her demeanour succeeded after a while in dispersing the numerous human butterflies that had hovered around her, attracted not only by her undoubted loveliness, but by her reputed wealth; for Hélène was sole heiress of the superb domains of De l'Orme, and of the untold riches that rumour said had been accumulating in the family ever since the time when the first De l'Orme had been present at the laying of the Conqueror in his Norman tomb.

Deserted at length by the frivolous cavaliers, and forgotten by the gay dames and damsels, Hélène was left alone at the far extremity of the spacious saloon, and almost hidden from view by the glossy leaves of a luxuriant magnolia that stood at the entrance of a conservatory that adjoined the dancing-room, but entirely absorbed in her own thoughts, and they were none of the brightest—the fact of her



complete isolation was scarcely noticed by herself, until a man, young and handsome, whose keen eyes had quickly sought her out, approached and begged her to join in the valse that was on the eve of commencement. The girl started visibly, and flushed scarlet up to the delicate blue-veined temples, as the familiar voice fell suddenly upon her ear; but rising at once, in compliance with his request, she placed a cold and trembling hand upon his arm, and then, mute and motionless as a statue, she stood arresting his steps, with her gaze fixed anxiously on Madame la Marquise, who at the other end of the apartment conversed earnestly and at length with an elderly woman of most unprepossessing exterior, but who was sumptuously attired in satin and sheen, with rare jewels sparkling upon her gray hair and withered neck.

To casual observers, the lengthy colloquy might have seemed but an excuse for Madame la Marquise to enhance her own marvellous attractions by the vicinity of a foil; but H  l  ne knew that her haughty mother was not one to condescend to any petty manoeuvres for gaining admiration. To the strong passions of a Spaniard, Madame la Marquise united the overweening pride of Northern blood; and it was impossible that she should have singled out a parvenue Countess for especial courtesy, unless some weighty motive propelled the action. That motive, wheel within wheel, lay buried in the deepest recesses of her soul, known to none, and understood by none, save one individual, who crafty and cunning as Reynard, preserved his knowledge intact, and was content to bide his time for revealing it, until all was ripe for the schemes which he himself had in view.

"Of what is my Hélène thinking so earnestly?" questioned her companion in low and loving accents, as he pressed her hand closer to his heart, and looked down at her sweet face with unspeakable tenderness and admiration in his glance. "Surely there is no fascination about the Marseillaise Countess! If it were her son that attracted your eyes, I might perchance be jealous, dearest."

"Henri," she said, lifting up piteous eyes towards him, "what I am looking at makes me tremble for us both. I feel sure that it is not without an object in view that Count Marcy has come all the way from the south. He has heard perhaps that De l'Orme owns an heiress; and they say that he would sacrifice body and soul for gold. What would I not give to know all that is passing between his mother and mine!"

"Darling, your mother will surely have pity upon our love, and will respect the solemn vows that we have sworn so often to one another. She dare not sacrifice your happiness to mere interest, since she knows full well that, were your father still living, your happiness would be his primary care; and he would have given you to me, I feel. Hélène, your mother *must* know how utterly I adore you; that if aught arose to separate us, my heart would surely break."

And as Henri de Ville spoke, he looked unconsciously towards Madame la Marquise with soft and appealing eyes. Her eyes answered him, but there was something in their glance that sent the red blood to his cheek, and a thrill of misgiving through his breast. Full of amiability and condescension, the look he received yet seemed to him to portend ill to

the cause dearest to him in life ; and involuntarily he shuddered as he met it.

He had caught fleeting glances of the kind before, but under the refining influence of a genuine attachment, Madame la Marquise had experienced a certain timidity and shyness that belongs to youth. And she had averted her black eyes or veiled them beneath their thick fringe ere Henri, unsuspecting and in truth indifferent, had had time to read their eloquence. Nevertheless an instinctive desire had for months past urged him to avoid, inasmuch as lay in his power, and as much as a favoured guest at De l'Orme could do, the mother of his dear betrothed.

Hélène, less sanguine than her lover of any pity being accorded to her, or clemency shown towards him, responded to his words simply by a deep sigh, and then she let him lead her towards the dancers. With her rich dress displaying the symmetry of her figure, and her long fair hair falling over her snow-white shoulders, she excited admiration, and interest as well, for though none in the giddy crowd were cognizant of the real cause of her sadness, yet all were impressed with the idea that Hélène de l'Orme, young, lovely, and wealthy, was yet far from happy or to be envied.

The strains of music sounded loudly, and the dancing, as the evening wore on, increased in avidity ; and De Ville, taking advantage of the solitude that so often exists in the very midst of a multitude, poured passionate protestations into Hélène's ear. Although of a nation that is characterized by a certain amount of frivolity and fickleness, Henri was of a steadfast nature, and possessed a depth of feeling that was not

common in men of his day. H  l  ne was his first love; and he felt that if he lost her no woman would ever replace her image in his heart, or make him forget the world of pure yet passionate emotions that she had aroused in him. It was a heaven upon earth to him to be able to clasp her slight waist with his arm, and to feel her heart beating against his own. But poor H  l  ne dared not answer him by speech or look, although the sweet words she listened to with quickened pulses told her that he whom she loved better than her life was in truth her very own, and that his constancy would endure through all time and trial; for the flashing orbs of Adela  de Marquise de l'Orme seemed to follow her wherever she went, with a fierce and jealous expression in their dark depths that H  l  ne shrank from, without being able to comprehend. Frightened, she almost regretted having allowed herself even a short glimpse of happiness with De Ville, since that gleam of happiness resembled the treacherous midsummer sun, whose bright bold rays are so often but the precursors of a terrible storm. Pale as a lily and utterly dejected, she was on the point of seeking her secluded corner once more, when a lacquey, in all the glory of powdered hair and red-and-gold livery, addressed her with a curt and cruel message.

"Madame la Marquise desires you, mademoiselle, to retire at once to your own apartments."

H  l  ne bent her little head meekly in acquiescence, and prepared to obey; but De Ville, indignant, remonstrated against the peremptory command.

"H  l  ne," he said vehemently, "the ball is not near its close, and it is offering an insult to your guests to desert them so soon. Your mother is wrong



o take advantage of your gentleness and obedience. assert yourself, dearest one, and stay."

"No, Henri." And as she spoke her rosy lips uivered, and humid drops filled her eyes: for she was ery young, and to leave the ball at its zenith, when lenri was by her side, was a keen disappointment to er. "I *must* obey. And something tells me that his is neither the last nor the greatest sacrifice that ill be required of me! Good-night."

De Ville clasped her hand fervently. This girl, so early resembling an angel, loved him, and was willing o be his wife. Yet a power—the power of a mere roman—snatched the cup of bliss from him, and he was helpless to resist. The thought that H  l  ne might ever be his drove the blood from his face, and he went over the hand he held to hide his emotion; but H  l  ne divined his feelings with the instinct of true ove.

"Henri, let me see a smile upou your face before I go," she murmured softly. "It will give me strength o bear everything bravely."

De Ville looked straight into her eyes, and forced a mile.

"My darling, may all good angels watch over you ill we meet again."

She gave him a shy and loving look in reply, and then glided quietly away.

And Henri de Ville, heartsick and angry, and rating the music, the lights, and the mirth that seemed to mock at him, turned upon his heel; and he vigilant eyes of Madame la Marquise lost sight of him in the darkness that reigned outside the chateau.

PART II.

COUNT MARCY's game was prospering well ; and he and his numerous suite remained at the chateau, pressed to prolong their stay by its noble châtelaine. From the epoch of the birthday gala, an unwonted stir and excitement filled ancient De l'Orme, which up to this period, save when royalty had occasionally sojourned there, had borne the solemn and silent aspect of a convent. It was in truth a marvel that the old Norman ghosts did not arise from their slumbers in the cloisters hard by, to reproach the profane roysterers who sought to transform the stately halls into a temple dedicated to Terpsichore and Bacchus, where nightly orgies were held until the grey hand of dawn pointed rebukingly at pallid faces and haggard eyes ; while malevolent tongues wagged apace that the Chateau de l'Orme, forgetful of its dignity, had been transmogrified into a hostelry, in which jingling instruments and clinking cups resounded from cockcrow to cock-crow.

Troops of servitors in gorgeous gear filled the long corridors, and horses of rare breed pawed and fretted in the vast courtyard. Early in the day the guests were astir in readiness for the chase, or for the sport of falconry ; and at even they sipped fragrant Mocha, and breathed the ambient air on the flower-laden terraces that formed the façade of the building. And Madame la Marquise, as though she had drunk of the waters of eternal youth and beauty, was the presiding deity guiding the helm of the bark of pleasure, and ~~making~~ ^{beaming} brilliant smiles around ; so that none de-



cted the stab in her heart when, in the midst of her yest sallies, she saw Henri de Ville, with a pallid and scornful lip, turn from the noisy group and under into the sequestered woodland paths, where even the echo of merriment could not reach him.

Naught could dissipate his melancholy, or rouse him from the lethargic despondency into which he had fallen, save the name of Hélène. Yet, with her eyes fully closed to the love that was patent to all observers, Madame la Marquise, whenever accident or the sult of her own scheming threw De Ville in her proximity, sought to instil into his mind, in ambiguous and insidious language, the advantages accruing from a brilliant alliance with a woman well known in the *grand monde*, and capable of raising the husband of her choice from a comparatively humble and insignificant position to the highest pinnacle of society and fashion.

And De Ville, trembling within himself, feared that at last he understood but too well the significance of her words. Hating the false position into which cruelty had placed him, he would have right willingly exchanged the spot and the unwelcome favour of his hostess, whose frowns were things of less dread than her Circean smiles; but his heart clung to the palatial prison in which his darling was immured. Harassed and miserable, he knew not how to act. His very soul rebelled against the trammels laid upon him by the imperious mandate of Adelaïde de l'Orme, a woman of an iron nature, whose will was not to be set aside. Hélène's sweet face was a sight completely denied him, and yet how unutterably he thirsted to look upon it again! But strictly watched by the orders of her mother, the girl was a species of state prisoner in her own sumptuous apartments, which were situated in a

wing of the chateau that was reserved solely for the family, and in which no alien footsteps, save those of the servants, were allowed to tread. At last one morning, unable to resist her longing for air and freedom, H  l  ne, eluding the vigilance of the waiting-woman whose espionage had become so irksome, stole down to the garden whilst la Marquise and her guests were lapped in slumber.

Like the poor bird that had vainly beaten its wings against the iron bars and suddenly found itself released from durance vile, she stood drinking in with delight the first sweet breath of waking day. The scent of the flowers, the freshness of the bosquets, came to her, bringing joy and hope in their train; and H  l  ne felt lighter hearted than she had done for many a weary hour. It was difficult for the child to believe, at the tender age of seventeen, that naught but misery and disappointment existed upon the fair earth, when nature itself, emerging from under the cloak of night, appeared to revel with such infinite zest in its emancipation.

She seated herself near an old marble fountain, all chipped and broken, and watched the limpid water fall with a gentle murmur over a bank of blue violets that rose hard by. The sun, rising slowly in the east, cast little golden streaks across the pathway, and the variegated butterflies hovered over the chalices of the passion-flower that was trained into an arbour near.

And H  l  ne, with her face turned towards the fountain, fell to dreaming of her childhood's days—those sweet and peaceful days, when full of spirits she would steal on tiptoe, and with a mischievous hand try and debar the pretty butterflies from their innocent enjoyment; and then came thoughts of later days, when she had first met Henri de Ville, and learnt to love him.

She remembered how handsome and stalwart she had thought him when her father had presented him to her as the orphan of his dearest friend, the brave old General de Ville, who had fallen covered with wounds in the thickest of the battle at Marengo; and with all this the memory of her dead father rose up vividly before her, and leaning her forehead on the edge of the fountain she burst into tears, until the touch of a hand on her shoulder made her glance up hastily, to find her lover by her side.

De Ville's face, with the joy of the unexpected meeting, was bright and smiling; but hers was anxious and frightened, and grieved at the sight of her sadness, he clasped her in his arms and whispered,

"Hélène, my own, your mother has done her best to keep us apart, but Heaven has reunited us, you see."

She freed herself gently from his hold, and her lids fell before his ardent glance.

"Henri, leave me, I beseech of you! My mother has forbidden me to speak to you, and Heaven will not bless a disobedient child, I fear;" and in the enthusiasm of the faith in which she had been brought up, she cast an imploring look upwards, as though deprecating pardon for her involuntary sin. "If Madame la Marquise should discover that you and I have met, Henri, to-morrow I shall be sent to the Convent of Notre Dame, the grey walls of which are frowning on me now;" and she pointed with her finger to a hill on the left, on which a huge and gloomy pile reared itself into view.

The austere aspect of the place sent a shiver through De Ville's veins. It was in truth no fit habitation for his dainty and delicate love, whose dwelling should

have been in Paphian bowers. Folding his betrothed closely, he registered an inward vow that, with a strong will and a brave heart, the home in which Hélène should find rest would be his arms. With this blessed thought came hope and fortitude, driving away the clouds of despair and despondency that had been hanging above him ; but his happiness was dashed away by the words that, sounding like an evil omen, fell from his companion's lips.

" Henri," she whispered, with a sad quiver on her poor little mouth, " a worse fate than the convent may be in store for me. My mother may force me to accept a husband of her own choosing."

Hélène, *his* Hélène, belonging to another ! The very suggestion froze up the blood within him ; and all he could do was to clasp her closer to him now, and feel that, in the *present* at any rate, she was his.

" Dearest one, have I not the right to guard you from all this ?" he exclaimed passionately. It seemed to him, standing there with her heart against his own, her hand in his, that no mortal breathing could have the power to wrest his darling from his grasp.

" No one can protect me against my mother. She has a sacred right over me that none can dispute. Henri, I *must* obey her, even if my heart breaks !" And laying her head against his arm, she sobbed passionately.

After a few moments she raised her face, all white and wet, looking like a lily that the rain beat on ; and calling up courage she said :

" Let us part now, and try not to meet again, until we can do so with my mother's sanction. Perhaps the future may bring us happier days, Henri." And she strove hard to smile.

De Ville bent down and kissed her brow, and then her lips; but even his caress brought no colour or warmth to them. Freeing herself gently from him, he walked with rapid steps homewards; but Henri, in spite of her entreaties, persisted in following her, sooth was he to lose sight of her again. Moreover, suddenly possessed by a spirit of cruelty which he himself could hardly comprehend, he could not resist hurling reproaches at her for shortening their interview, when their chances were so much against another meeting.

At last, having gained the vestibule, H  l  ne turned towards him, and, folding her hands together in entreaty, implored of him to desist in his pursuit. She looked so pale, with the recent tears still glittering in her soft blue eyes, and fear was so legibly written on her features, that De Ville was struck to the heart, and blamed himself heartily for having added to her griefs.

"Forgive me," he whispered soothingly, "for having distressed you; I *will* leave you; but as it may be a long, long time before we meet again, H  l  ne, let me place this little ring on your finger in remembrance of our mutual love—an emblem of our everlasting fidelity; for, my own, I feel that nothing but death will really part us. For a little while I may lose you; but something tells me that as long as earth holds your spirit, your heart will be mine and mine alone. Of *my* feelings it were useless to speak; whilst I live, I am yours, body and soul! H  l  ne, my dearest, my *all*, I swear to me that you love me; it will give me strength to bear the bitter trial of separation that lies before me."

His words went straight from his heart to hers, and rendered her for a few brief minutes entirely oblivious

of the dangers of her position. It was De Ville, her lover, who knelt before her; the only man who had ever uttered words of tenderness into her virgin ears; the only being in whose presence her cheek flushed and her pulses beat. Not marvellous, then, that she forgot all the world but him. Stooping over him, she let him place the ring on her hand.

"Henri, you *know* that I love you. Our affection, so true, so deep, can never die. Be faithful to me, as I shall be to you. I *swear* it, Henri; and see"—her eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed like summer roses—"I seal my oath!" And she pressed her sweet fresh lips to his forehead, and then drew back hastily, ashamed of the freedom of her action. The dread of having exceeded the bounds of maidenly decorum, united to the bitter pain of parting with De Ville, made her unconscious of the lapse of time; and she leant against the balustrade of the great staircase, having no courage to quit the charmed spot where Henri clasped her hand, upon which a brilliant sparkled in the light.

At length, murmuring a final adieu, she hastened into the saloon, without glancing to the right or left, until a slight cough attracted her notice, and the sight of Count Marcy arrested her steps. He was close upon her, and by the strange and ironical smile that curled his thin lips, she divined at once that he had been an unseen witness to her interview with Henri.

With a bitter and mocking expression on his dark face, and a wicked glitter in his bold black eyes, he came forward and held out his hand in greeting; and Hélène, pale as death and agitated like a leaf driven by the blast, allowed him to lead her to an ottoman, upon which she sank half unconscious.

Her stern mother—the mother whose ire was so terrible in her sight—would undoubtedly hear from the malevolent Count of the flagrant act of disobedience of which she had apparently been guilty. And the fear of the consequences that would ensue curdled her blood, and made her pulse throb so quickly, that it was difficult for her to breathe.

De Ville, indignant and miserable, was a spectator of the whole scene from the extremity of the room. From sheer pity and consideration for H  l  ne, his words and actions were hampered, and, controlling his wrath, he was forced to content himself by casting fiery glances at his insolent rival. The glances, however, met with no response, but were treated with a supreme indifference which was infinitely more galling. Count Marcy, a son of the south, with turbulent passions rife in his breast, was yet quite diplomatic enough to recognise at once the fallacy of quarrelling with the man that Madame la Marquise loved. Adela  de de l'Orme had guarded her secret vigilantly from the world ; but the sharp eyes of the wily Marseillais had succeeded in penetrating it. Instead, therefore, of throwing provocative looks at De Ville, he took up a music-book, and, opening it, proposed that H  l  ne should try a new romanza. The girl accepted the book, and her finger followed the notes mechanically ; but her voice entirely refused to do her bidding, and, in spite of her strenuous efforts to sing, she sat mute and wofully embarrassed.

Silence fell on the trio ; but so false a calm could not last very long ; and by way of sympathy, a storm burst suddenly outside, and the sky, which had been so blue and so smiling but an hour before, grew leaden and louring, while the wind, that had gently fanned

the golden tresses on Hélène's brow, shook the huge trees in the park with violent gusts.

De Ville, frank and impulsive, was almost beside himself as he watched the covert persecution of the hated count ; and seizing a guitar that lay close by, he vented his angry feelings in a few discordant sounds ; but his impetuous touch broke the strings, and flinging the instrument on the floor, he strode towards the spot where his rival sat, and, facing him, said—

“ You seem partial to music ; well, then, tell me what you think of the words of this.” And he began to recite in a loud tone the verses of an old Norman ditty that ended with “ A bragging gallant is a pitiful coward.”

Count Marcy rose quickly from his seat, and drew himself up haughtily to his full height, whilst a deep-red flush stained his swarthy face, and an ominous scowl knitted his thick brows.

“ I see that you have understood my song perfectly,” laughed De Ville, mockingly.

The Count's accents, naturally unmusical, grew strangely hard and guttural in his wrath, and his brawny fists clenched together tightly. A bully and braggart where women were concerned, he yet was not lacking in courage, and he longed to punish the offender who, with a form sligher and weaker than his own, dared so openly to beard him in his teeth.

“ I understand the meaning so well, that I am impatient to chastise the insolence of the singer.”

“ Are you ?” and De Ville, without another moment's deliberation, gave his enemy a blow, which sent him reeling backwards like a drunkard ; but he recovered himself instantly. Hélène, falling on her knees, implored them to desist, but as though infuriated like wild beasts, they remained deaf to her

prayers, and blow after blow crossed over her very head.

Then suddenly two powdered lacqueys in gorgeous liveries flung open the doors widely, and Madame la Marquise, attired in a superb training dress of the richest violet velvet, and with priceless ruffles of point adorning her neck and arms, entered the room with her usual slow and stately step.

At the sight of her the adversaries at once suspended the fight.

She looked from one to another with the greatest astonishment dilating her dark pupils.

"Great heavens! what has happened?" she cried.

"Separate them, for the love of God! separate them, or they will surely murder one another," sobbed poor Hélène, still kneeling on the ground.

"Rise immediately, mademoiselle! Your extraordinary posture surprises me beyond expression!" said la Marquise, in a severe and peremptory tone which few could have possessed the hardihood to disobey. "Have you utterly forgotten that the De l'Ormes were born to command, and not to beg?"

Hélène rose at once and tottered to a chair.

"And now, gentlemen, a few words with you. You seem oblivious of the fact that you are guests at De l'Orme, and that I, as its châtelaine, have ample cause to be offended at your strange conduct. I certainly believed you to be friends, and I cannot comprehend the sudden animosity that seems to have risen up between you."

"Monsieur de Ville will explain all to you far better than I can do, madame!" and to better his cause, Count Marcy reassumed his habitual suave manner; while Henri, with scarlet cheeks and flashing

eyes, forgot the *convenances* of society in his honest wrath and indignation. "I have only to say that it was much against my will that such a scandal should have occurred in any mansion in which I have been the grateful recipient of a princely hospitality. I swear to you, madame, on the honour of a Marcy that no tongue has ever dared to arraign, that it was far from my purpose or inclination to become an eavesdropper to a most interesting interview; and it was quite accident that made me witness this gentleman betroth himself to your fair daughter with a ring. And there is the proof of my words, madame!" and he insolently seized H  l  ne's white hand and displayed the trinket.

"Monsieur de Ville, is this *really* true?" exclaimed Madame la Marquise, and just for a shade her voice quivered and sounded terribly piteous; but gathering herself up, as it were, she stood erect and queenly, scrutinizing Henri's changing countenance with firm unflinching eyes.

"Scoundrel," cried de Ville, "you do not mind adding invention to insult! The tale you have heard is false, madame. I met your daughter by pure chance in the garden; I spoke to her, nay, I even protested my most passionate and earnest love for her. Oh, madame, what ails you?" for all the rich colour had died right out from Madame la Marquise's cheeks.

Ashen hued, with lips that shook, she clutched the chair nearest to her, and leant heavily on it for support.

"Nothing, nothing; go on!" she said authoritatively; and she hastily passed her laced handkerchief over her brow to remove the great beads that mental torture had brought there.

"But my pleading was futile, my passion rejected.

Mademoiselle de l'Orme, strong and immovable in her filial affection and obedience, besought me to leave her ; and if at length she deigned to accept a trifling souvenir, it was from sheer pity, and not from love !”

“ He is deceiving you, my mother !” cried H  l  ne. “ It is true that, in obedience to your commands, I bade him leave me, but I did so with a breaking heart ; and I am not ashamed to confess how dearly and faithfully I love him !”

“ I know it, girl !” and la Marquise hissed out the words in the desperate anger and jealousy that racked her soul. She felt as though she could have willingly crushed the form of the daughter kneeling at her feet, in the unutterable despair of discovering that De Ville, he whom she had so long worshipped in secret, was lost to her for ever, and that in the only child that Heaven had given her lived an envied and detested rival.

Livid, with scorn curling her mouth, and her eyes all aflame, her voice rang out bitterly hard and cruel.

“ I guessed your mad folly long ago, but I did not believe that that folly was shared by another ;” and she cast a withering look at the recreant who had dared to slight her favour. “ I have vainly tried to implant in you the good faith and honour of a De l'Orme. In former days filial obedience was a supreme virtue in the family, and you are the sole De l'Orme that has forgotten duty for the sake of less sacred feelings. This man,” and Madame la Marquise, pointing with her patrician finger at De Ville, concentrated all the contempt she could muster up into her bold gaze, “ has neither wealth nor title. He is a mere adventurer, a *nobody* ; and no fit mate for the heiress of De l'Orme. That gentleman,” and she bowed affably to the Count, “ has done you the

honour of asking your hand in marriage, and I have accorded his request. H  l  ne, you *shall* be Countess Marcy !”

“*Never !* so help me Heaven, whilst I have life and strength !” cried De Ville. “H  l  ne, *my* H  l  ne, one kiss !” and catching the trembling girl in his arms, he strained her to his breast, and pressed her lips fervently.

“And now let us go out,” he added imperiously to his adversary, who obeyed the invitation unhesitatingly.

H  l  ne dragged herself to a window and then sank insensible on the ground ; but Madame la Marquise, losing sight of her ordinary dignity and calmness, uttered a loud scream and rushed wildly into the grounds towards the direction in which she had seen the antagonists disappear.

The woodland paths were deserted, the lightning flashed vividly athwart the branches of the trees, the thunder pealed loudly, and the rain fell in torrents ; but indifferent to the fury of the elements, she ran madly on, only stopping to listen with strained ears to any noise. At length the clashing of swords resounded close by ; and with his head bare and a weapon stained with blood in his hand, Count Marcy emerged from a bosquet and faced her.

At the sight of him, Madame la Marquise stood breathless and horror-stricken. She essayed to speak, but her tongue clove to her mouth, and her eyes glared wildly at him.

“You have killed Henri de Ville,” she articulated at last, slowly and with difficulty. Count Marcy looked at her, and smiled one of his sardonic smiles. He could scarcely bring himself to believe that the terri-

fied woman before him, with her rich velvet garments all wet and bedraggled, and her long black hair floating dishevelled over her shoulders, was the haughty queen of fashion and beauty—the proud châtelaine of De l'Orme.

But she, with the vision of De Ville dead, never so much as noticed the insolent scrutiny. She was only trying to realize what life would be to her when the grave had hidden away the form of De Ville for ever.

“The man whom both you and your daughter love so well is *not* dead, but he is dangerously wounded; and I have desired my servants to bear him to a peasant's cottage in the vicinity. It is a good enough lodging for such as he!” the Count said scornfully.

She grew white as a sheet, and her limbs shook as though palsy had suddenly seized them; but a hopeful light replaced the glare in her eyes, and she tried to avert her face so as to conceal her emotion from the man before her. By that very movement he knew that the tidings that De Ville lived had brought her back from the frenzy of despair to a consciousness of the *convenances* that are so omnipotent to a French-woman.

“And, Madame la Marquise,” he added with an evil sneer, “when Henri de Ville fell to the earth, a woman's name burst from his pallid lips; that name was *not* Adelaïde!”

She raised her head loftily. The bright colour flew back to her cheeks, and with a cry for revenge in her soul, she pronounced in slow and solemn accents an irrevocable vow.

“Henri de Ville may perchance recover, but not before the heiress of De l'Orme becomes the wife of Count Marcy!”

PART III.

THE wealth that the southern Count had coveted was his, but his bride slept peacefully in the arms of death.

Hélène died the day of her nuptials.

It might have been that, fragile as a flower, the horror of her fate killed her; or, more terrible still, perchance, helpless and desperate, she flew to the grave as her only escape from a hated life.

* * * *

Two months afterwards a man, thin and haggard-eyed, prayed earnestly beside a tomb in the chapel belonging to the Chateau de l'Orme. Upon the marble tablet was inscribed—

“ Here lies

HELENE DE L'ORME, COUNTESS MARCY.

Heaven have mercy on her soul !”

The shadows of evening stole gradually into the building, and a solemn stillness reigned around, while the flowers that had been strewn upon the tomb sent up a faint and sickly odour.

But the watcher recked nothing of loneliness. Unmindful of the long vigil he kept, he leant his hot throbbing forehead on the cold marble and dreamt on—dreamt of his poor lost love, so beautiful and so young, who had gone from him for ever.

Fanciful from illness and the depth of sorrow that had fallen upon him, a strange and feverish longing possessed him to see his Hélène once more, with angels' wings and an aureole of glory round her head.

Suddenly a slight sound broke upon the profound

silence and aroused him. Upon the side of the chapel, on which some errant moonbeams cast their flickering light, the form of a woman was shadowed, and a deep sob issued near.

The mourner started up, with a radiant smile illuminating his pallid features, and opening his arms wide, he cried eagerly—

“Hélène! my Hélène!”

The figure quickly vanished, but not before a too well-remembered voice had murmured, in accents that were choked by tears—

“Henri de Ville, think of Hélène as a pure spirit in heaven, where no grief can reach her! But, oh! if your heart *can* pardon, pray for the wretched and erring mother who lives to suffer and repent!”





SYBIL ASHTON.

PART I.



LONDON in the dog-days—dusty and glary, and with a temperature of 85° in the shade, but possessing with all these drawbacks an infinite attraction for the pleasure-seeking and excitement-loving million, to whose taste the crowded balls and fashionable thoroughfares are a thousand times more in consonance than all the wondrous beauty that Dame Nature ever displayed in dell and wood; for Summer, the queen of the year, when country air blows balmy with the breath of bud and blossom, is yet the zenith of the *grande saison* in the great Babylon, when fashion holds her court, and her votaries, flocking obsequiously around, are loth to quit the charmed circle, till forced to do so by the mandate of their imperious deity. But although the glitter and gaiety have many worshippers, and even a few believers in them, there are some mortals, possibly more sober-minded and sensible than their fellows, who are capable of perceiving the real hollowness and falsity of the dazzling scene; who are able to trace a mask for an aching heart in the smile that wreathes beauty's lips, and who can detect an empty purse, and even a hungry pang, 'neath a coat

that is a *chef-d'œuvre* of Poole's ; but these are mortals who have lived long in the world, feeling its manifold knocks and brunts, and who have learnt by experience that, according to the preacher, all things are but "vanity and vexation of spirit," although the latter is often cheerfully endured to arrive at a fleeting gratification of the former. Paul Fielding was one of the brotherhood of sceptics in genuine enjoyment, as, leaning at a window of a house in the West-end, his gaze rested wearily upon the incessant stream of passers-by wending their steps to the parks. His thoughts at the moment were none of the brightest or happiest, and they might possibly have imparted a more jaundiced hue to existence than it usually wore to him. As he stood in a listless attitude, the glare of the midsummer noon fell full upon him, but failed to lighten the heavy shadow on his brow. He was a tall man of about thirty, but with delicate features, and a slight fragile figure that made him look older than his age ; and he had a quiet earnest face, that owned no pretensions to beauty save a pair of deep honest eyes, and a smile, rare and grave, but as tender as a woman's.

The room of which he was an occupant was of large dimensions, and replete with all the luxuries that wealth could purchase and refined taste suggest, from the exquisitely-painted ceiling to the Sèvres vase of exotics that graced the centre table.

At the farthest end from the window where Paul stood, lounging idly upon a sofa, was the woman he loved. Her hands—fair, small, aristocratic, and gleaming with jewels—played with a large fan. Her form was slender, and she had a graceful neck and supple waist, with a haughty sparkling face, and red lips that sneers and smiles alike became.

Her dark grey eyes were apparently bent on the ground, but from under the black curling lashes she cast frequent but covert glances towards her companion, whilst an expression bordering on triumph rapidly crossed her countenance at the marked evident signs of sadness and indecision about him.

"And it is really your determination to break with me, Sybil?" Fielding said slowly, after a long pause, but less in a tone of interrogation than as if he were speaking in a dream. His eyes went out eagerly and pleadingly towards her; but her head was studiously averted from him.

"Yes, Paul; my final determination."

There was no falter in the sweet musical voice, no symptom of softening, no quiver on the proud red lips, and Paul felt his heart sink very sadly within him as he strove vainly to read a line of relenting in the beautiful face that had grown to be dearer to him than life, or aught else upon the earth. It was true he could only judge of Sybil's real feelings by the surface, and that was as hard and as cold as marble; or perchance the rapid throbbing of the girl's breast beneath her muslin bodice, and the icy coldness of her little fingers, as they nervously marred the beauty of her fan, might have proved panaceas for the terrible pain in his heart, that blanched his features and made existence appear utterly valueless in his eyes.

Sybil Ashton's downcast glance was genuine enough now. Not for the world would she have met her lover's look, fearing that by doing so she would imperil the carrying out of her resolution. Her cheek, usually brilliant with the roses of health, now paled and flushed alternately, but that was the only visible proof of any perturbation within; and Paul, utterly unable

to sustain silence or calmness any longer, crossed the room with rapid strides, and kneeling before her, clasped her hands tightly in his own. His voice was very low and broken, and, listening to its tones, none could have doubted how precious to him was the suit he so earnestly pressed.

"Listen to me, Sybil, my Sybil! I cannot believe you yet! I cannot bring myself to credit that you, whom I have always looked upon as the best and kindest upon earth, can thus cruelly, heartlessly, ay, even *wickedly*, wreck a man's whole life, as you are doing mine, for a mere chimera of the brain—a miserable folly! Nay, do not turn away haughtily from me, but hear, at any rate, what I have to say; and even if I fail in shaking your determination to cast me off, let me, Sybil, for the last time, tell you all that is within my heart. The vilest criminals are allowed to plead for their life: surely you will not deny me equal privilege with them?" and poor Paul's accents grew less brave and firm each moment; but, nerving himself up, he tried to go on.

"For two years, Sybil, you have been my promised wife—my only thought by day, the angel whose face has hovered near me in my dreams by night. To say that I *love* you would be untrue; for love, in the common acceptation of the word, is pale and faint and weak in comparison to what I feel. Darling, mine is worship, and not love! Yes, you may smile at the bare notion of one so quiet, prosaic, even commonplace as me, being capable of such a feeling; but it is natures like my own, slow to move, unimpressionable as a rule, cold and hard if you will, that, once aroused into passion, yield up that passion only in death."

His words were eloquent with feeling, and truth shone out of his earnest eyes, but neither eyes nor voice had power to touch the woman he loved. Still as a statue she sat and listened, but the arms that had been wont to steal round his neck in happier times remained unmoved, and the mouth that had often murmured softly in his ear was mute and still.

"Sybil, oh think of the misery you are dooming me to for ever and ever! Think of the happy hours we have passed together, when loving words have fallen from your lips, and your dear eyes have looked into mine! Child, pause before you decide, and do not play with a human heart as with a football. You too will grieve when I am gone, Sybil; and your soul, in spite of pride, will yearn for the love that is past—will consent to the prayer gone by. Recall your determination, or I shall think that your reasons for sending me from you are scarcely the real ones. I shall believe, Sybil, that some one has come between your heart and mine."

"Daisy Warriner, Paul!"

And as Sybil Ashton spoke that name, there was an unusual jar in the softness of her accents, and her lips curled themselves in a sneer.

Fielding started up from his kneeling position, and let go the hands he held.

For a moment or so anger and impatience were the chief expressions on his countenance, but they quickly passed away, leaving a weary and hopeless look behind them. The bright summer day had brought him a vast deal of unhappiness, and vexation as well. He had been grappling with unreasonable fancies, and vainly trying to argue with his companion, striving hard to ignite a spark of right feeling



in her bosom on the subject of contention between them. Jealousy, and a jealousy that was still more difficult to combat with for the very reason that it was so utterly groundless and wild, had taken deep root within her, and all his arguments and efforts were futile to eradicate the foul weed. But he loved her quite as honestly and passionately as he had averred full many a time, and he could not bear to let her drift away from him without a desperate struggle to keep her. The name she had given utterance to, although it was a pretty one, possessed the power apparently of conjuring up all manner of evil feeling, for her face had suddenly clouded darkly, all the sparkle had died out of it, and skilful physiognomists might have traced a hard sullen line round her mouth, whilst on her long black lashes a tear, evoked by the green-eyed monster, glistened brightly, in spite of her evident desire to sustain an indifferent exterior. That tear of sensibility was, however, more precious in Paul's sight than a diamond, since it proved that, cold and callous as she had appeared to be, she was not quite devoid of feeling, and he yet had the power to touch her heart. He sat down beside her, but the arm that had crept round her waist was quickly and gently put aside, and she shrank away a little distance from him. Paul *felt* the movement more than he could see it, and although of a firm and manly nature, at that moment he would have willingly cried like a child. Sybil's slightest unkindliness was wont to cut him to the soul. He was a good and a true man, living a pure and blameless life, and paramount amongst his manifold virtues was his fidelity in thought and deed to her whom he had asked to be his wife. For the space of two years she had been the one

woman in all the world to him, and sooner than have hurt her by disloyalty, he would have given up life, for that life's whole happiness was centred in Sybil. To her he was indulgent even to weakness ; and to do her smallest will he would readily have sacrificed everything but *right*. Hitherto it had been smooth enough, the path of love, shadowed now and then by a lovers' quarrel, in which the sweetness of reconciliation made up for temporary grief ; but now a gigantic struggle had arisen, and Sybil or conscience was at stake. As he sat, drinking in with rapt eyes the beauty that his soul as well as his eyes worshipped, he felt love mighty, omnipotent, overweighing the balance. What on earth could make up to him for the loss of the woman he so dearly loved ? and a little while, and sooner than give up the blessed hope of possessing her for his wife, he would have yielded to her wishes and lost his own self-respect ; but shaking off the glamour of her presence and collecting his failing strength, he determined to give up love, and to follow the dictates of duty.

"Sybil," he said gravely, and he succeeded in steadying his tones while he prepared himself for an unsuccessful issue to his appeal, "you know full well that Daisy Warriner can in no wise interfere between you and me. You *must* surely feel that you have all my heart, and that the affection I give her is that which a man bestows on a young sister. My very soul is yours, Sybil, and it will be a death-blow to my happiness to lose you ; but I swore on my knees at the bedside of Daisy's dying father that, with heaven's help, I would always befriend and serve his orphan child. And here, Sybil, see, again upon my knees,

although you may cast me off for ever, I reiterate that most solemn oath !”

The girl had forgotten all her efforts at coldness and composure as he spoke, and as his last words fell upon her ears, she started up from her seat, and stood looking down upon him with flashing eyes, out of which all tenderness had gone. Her cheeks were aflame with a crimson that enhanced her beauty two-fold, and her fingers were clenched together in anger and agitation.

“Enough, Paul ; you need say no more. It is you who have decided the future by choosing between Daisy Warriner and me. I would not consent to be your wife for the world, with the prospect of a presence I hate and distrust shadowing my hearth, and destroying the happiness of each hour of my life ! No divided heart for me ! The man I marry must be all my own, and I’ll have no interlopers in my home. Sooner than give up the unspeakable bliss of watching over Miss Warriner’s welfare, you prefer to place an eternal barrier between you and me. Paul, you have *never* loved me, and I have been a fool to believe that you did !” she exclaimed passionately with scorn, and she swept haughtily past him towards the door.

Fielding caught her dress and arrested her steps. She glanced hastily at his white face and working lips, and stood still.

“I have chosen between you and duty, Sybil. No woman upon earth could take me away from you ; but I feel that even with you as my wife I should be an unhappy man, with the voice of conscience perpetually reproaching me for having perjured the vow made to a dying fellow-creature. I cannot send Daisy out

into the world, even though her presence will recall each moment the memory of the woman I worshipped and lost. But, oh Sybil, my soul's love, if you *will* send me from you, do not let it be in anger and scorn, but rather in a tender pity and earnest regret, that to preserve honour and faith I must yield up all that would have made life heaven to me. Speak to me, lay your lips once more against my own, and bid me go if it must be; but let me bear away with me a last loving look—let your voice fall once more kindly on my ears!"

Not a glance, not a word. The dark grey eyes were glittering with repressed feeling, but there was no light of love within them, and Sybil's white teeth were pressed down on her red under lip, that no emotion should be visible.

Paul rose up to his full height and confronted her. For a minute or two he seemed to be intently studying feature by feature of her face, with a strange and wistful look on his own countenance, but the study was evidently unsatisfactory. Sybil's face, like her heart, seemed to have suddenly become a sealed book to him. He took her hand, but it did not tremble in his grasp, and he felt that his cause was lost.

"Good-bye, Sybil; and if prayers of mine avail on high, heaven will bestow every blessing upon you. You know best if you are acting for your own happiness, and in spite of all *I* suffer, I sincerely trust you are right. But if at any time," and he bent towards her, while his voice grew softer, and his lips quivered, "when your judgment is cooler, reflection shows you how cruelly you are punishing me for a mere fancy, Sybil, write to me, only one word, and I shall be at your feet."

"I shall *never* write to you," she said coldly and curtly. And Fielding, without another look towards her, took up his hat and strode out of the room. The treatment he had received revealed a new phase in the character of the woman he loved, that startled him, and caused a bitterness of spirit that length of time would alone smooth away.

"Paul, forgive me! come back," cried Sybil, and with tears blinding her eyes she rushed first to the door and then to the window, but only in time to see Fielding's tall figure turn quickly down a quiet by-street. She gazed out after him eagerly, hope whispering the flattering tale that, unable to give her up, he would return and renew his persuasions; and dreamily to herself she pictured a scene in which, after a proper display of pride, she would relent, and become the recipient of her lover's warm gratitude and eloquent thanks for having restored to him the happiness he craved. But the moments slipped by, and after a while Sybil, with her haughty looks and stately manner all flown, walked despondingly back to the sofa, and, burying her face in the cushion, sobbed as if her heart would break. Although it was barely an hour since Paul had left her, she seemed to realize completely that she had lost him for ever, and already she yearned to have him once more beside her. The sudden opening of the door behind roused her and stilled her sobs. For an instant she fancied Paul had returned, and with quickened pulses and the hot blood rushing to her face, she sat quite still, but with her heart beating audibly. The sight of her mother's figure dispelled her fancy; and, ashamed of the emotion she had given way to, she averted her countenance, and trusted to escape notice. But Mrs.

Ashton's shrewd eyes detected the traces of tears at once, and, anxious to ascertain if any serious rupture had occurred between Sybil and her betrothed, she forgot her accustomed circumlocution and questioned pithily—

“Where is Mr. Fielding, Sybil?”

“Gone,” murmured the girl, gulping down a sob.

“Gone!—where?”

“I do not know.”

“When does he return?”

“*Never!*” And with that ominous word sounding a death-knell to all her hope and happiness, Sybil burst into a violent torrent of tears, and made no effort to conceal her suffering.

The desire of Mrs. Ashton's heart was fulfilled. To break off the engagement between her daughter and Paul had been the end and aim of her life for some time, but she had scarcely known how to set about its accomplishment. Paul was neither sufficiently affluent nor aristocratic to please her, and personally she had a virulent dislike to him. She was a thorough woman of the world, full of wiles and deceptions, that to Paul's frank and honest nature were mean and contemptible; and although he forced himself to be civil to her, he could not entirely disguise his real sentiments. And Mrs. Ashton, cunning and penetrating, detected the hollowness of his friendliness, especially as Paul was no adept in hypocrisy. She had long repined at the notion that her daughter, wealthy and beautiful, should have drawn so poor a prize as a country gentleman, possessing neither title nor riches. Whilst poor Sybil's eyes were dim with crying, Mrs. Ashton smiled quietly and complacently to herself, and in lieu of attempting to console her

child by a display of maternal affection, she walked to the opposite mirror on pretence of arranging her headgear, but in reality to gain time for consideration as to the most politic mode of conduct under the circumstances. She could scarcely bring herself to believe that it was a final rupture. It was probably but a lovers' quarrel, which would have the effect of tightening the chain rather than loosening it; but she resolved to improve the occasion towards furthering her wishes if possible, and to strike while the iron was hot.

"Sybil, I have noticed for some little time that your manner towards Mr. Fielding has been cold. What has he done to anger you?"

Sybil shook her head, and sighed as she remembered how little Paul had tried to anger her with his gentle forbearance and never-failing consideration, and in a low broken voice she murmured, "I am not angry with him in the least, mamma."

"Then it is jealousy that has been the cause of your unusual depression lately?"

She elicited no reply save a few more tears and one or two repressed sobs; so Mrs. Ashton smoothed carefully her ample silken skirts, and sitting down beside her daughter, commenced in silvery sympathizing accents—

"My poor child, of course it was jealousy, and of Daisy Warriner! And who could wonder at it? It is very seldom that such affection as Mr. Fielding evinces for a girl of Miss Warriner's age and attraction is purely paternal, especially when he must be gratified by the excessive fondness that the young lady so openly demonstrates for her 'guardian,' as she styles him. A 'guardian' is such a safe name, you

know. Loving you as I do, my dearest Sybil, I have, I candidly confess, experienced a good deal of very grave anxiety on the subject, and have deplored your unfortunate entanglement immensely. The truth is, that you are much too handsome and admired to be made the recipient of a divided heart."

Sybil winced under the cruel thrust. It was a repetition of her own words to Paul. It was a bitter thought that Paul's love should be given to any besides herself, and to have that thought embodied in words cut her to the soul.

"Why should Paul profess to care for me if he loves another?" she asked in a petulant voice; while inwardly she sorely resented her mother's insinuations that appeared to reflect on the truth and honesty of her lover, although but a short time back she herself had been sceptical of his faith and affection.

Mrs. Ashton had erred in her tact, and she perceived at once that to make Sybil the champion of Paul would be fatal to her cause, so she determined to call up a powerful aid—the pride that, though dormant occasionally, was yet the principal characteristic of Sybil's nature.

"Mr. Fielding, caught by your beauty, doubtless fancied himself in love with you when he proposed; and when he discovered the very patent fact that his love was returned tenfold, of course both honour and pity forbade his breaking his plighted word until perchance some good opportunity for release was offered him. Your undisguised jealousy has made that opportunity; and probably salving his conscience with the thought that it is not *his* fault, but your own, that a rupture has occurred, he has gone, feeling a free and happy man again!"



Surely the memory of poor Paul's white face and trembling voice should have given the lie to Mrs. Ashton's assertion, but Sybil, with the vision of Daisy Warriner's dainty head with its golden tresses haunting her, lost sight of sense and reason. She shook with passion at the bare notion of the undignified position she had borne so long, and for a moment Paul was a truly miserable man, for the woman he loved hated him.

"Pity made him keep his word to me," she ejaculated in a loud metallic voice. All the tears in her eyes were dried up by the fire of deep indignation, and a contemptuous sneer was upon her mouth, as, rising from her seat, she plucked from her bosom a flower that Paul had brought her, and stamped wrathfully upon it.

"Mr. Fielding shall not have my unhappiness to lay as a burden on his conscience. As long as I believed in his affection, I gave him mine; but hearts, thank heaven, are not brittle like glass, to be broken at man's will! There, mamma; 'Richard is himself again!' I shall never be Sybil Fielding now, so prepare yourself at once for the onerous task of finding a rich and titled husband for your daughter."

Sybil's sudden spirit was very forced, and Mrs. Ashton was too wise to be deceived; but her cue was to believe in it, while inwardly she dreaded the inevitable reaction.

"It makes me happy, my child, to see that your attachment to *that* Mr. Fielding" (she could not resist showing her dislike to him by the little word "that") "is not quite so strong and deep-seated as I feared. There are so many men so much more worthy of you, I am sure; and you will soon learn

to love some one else a thousand times dearer than you have imagined you loved him."

"Never!" said Sybil, impressively, but so lowly that it failed to reach her mother's ear. To find Paul again by her side, to throw her arms round his neck and hear him protest that she alone possessed his heart, was all that seemed worth living for; but driving away the strong yearning she felt, she began singing, "Oh maiden, beware of a gallant young knight."

The mantel-clock striking six interrupted her song. Mrs. Ashton scanned the flushed face anxiously; many a heart is caught in the rebound, she remembered; and at this time, just when Sybil was tortured by anger and jealousy, she would be more likely to show amicable ness if not favour towards another suitor. Sitting down, she hurriedly wrote and despatched a note, while Sybil, engrossed in her own thoughts, never so much as noticed her actions. The agitation of the afternoon had considerably marred her looks, and with her fair cheeks all stained by tears and her eyelids swollen, she was far from being as presentable as maternal solicitude desired. The day was growing on, the sun was getting lower and lower, and yet Sybil lingered at the window in her simple morning attire, with her wealth of hair pushed carelessly and unbecomingly off her throbbing forehead, and her sad eyes fixed on the identical spot on which she had seen the last of Paul.

"Sybil, I think a few friends are coming to dine, and it is getting near seven already," murmured Mrs. Ashton, plaintively. She felt herself somewhat aggrieved. She had written in post-haste to bid a guest to the festive board, and the object of the impromptu



invitation would be entirely defeated by the appearance of Sybil, after all her trouble. The girl, absorbed in her own miserable thoughts, did not hear a word.

"Sybil, I believe that Sir Courtenay Hayes will dine here at eight. Are you going to stand there and indulge in vain regret for a lost lover, instead of making yourself presentable to other people?" Mrs. Ashton exclaimed impatiently.

"I am to make myself beautiful for Sir Courtenay Hayes, you mean, mamma," Sybil answered with a scornful laugh, as she turned reluctantly away from the spot that had a potent charm for her, and looked wistfully round the room as if picturing to herself the different positions and places that Paul had taken that day.

" 'Tis good to be merry and wise,
'Tis good to be honest and true ;
'Tis good to be off with the old love
Before you are on with the new.'

Eh, mamma?" And stooping and picking up Paul's poor crushed flower that lay behind her mother, she hastily thrust it into the folds of her bodice, and left the room. Half an hour later, in the freshest of toilettes, with her magnificent hair wreathed into plaits, her eyes bright and cloudless, and her red lips beaming with smiles, she sat by Sir Courtenay Hayes' side, apparently as brilliant and happy as though no such person as Paul Fielding had ever touched her heart, and then left her for the sake of another.

PART II.

Nothing could have presented a prettier picture to the eye than Holmwood Grange, as the rays of the setting sun fell upon it, gilding the tops of the trees with a golden glory, and tinting all around with a soft and mellow light. Not that Holmwood Grange possessed any stateliness or grandeur about it; there was no aspiration to the Gothic or Corinthian in the architecture, and nothing artistic in the arrangement of the grounds. The house itself was simply a square substantial edifice of grey stone, here and there considerably darkened by time, and it had big bow windows opening down to a flower-bedecked lawn. An ancient pear-tree covered the façade of the building, and there was a roomy inviting porch with honeysuckle trails falling over it. An air of well-to-do comfort characterized the whole place, but there was not the faintest attempt at ostentation or show of any kind. It was just the house to suit a family whose genealogy was long and whose tastes were refined; but to a *nouveau riche* such a domicile would have been objectionable in the highest degree. A girl, blonde in type, and petite in her proportion rather than thin, with a face that owned a pair of soft serious blue eyes, and a shower of bright hair that fell below her waist, flitted in and out of the house with a basket of freshly-cut roses on her arm, with which she busily adorned the drawing-room, where a vase or glass met her gaze. Absorbed in her pretty task, she hovered about with her basket of floral treasures, a Titania, a very queen of the flowers, with

her ripe red lips and rich glowing cheeks ; while an old lady seated by the window in a capacious arm-chair watched her evolutions with a pleased expression.

“ Daisy, my child, one would think that some grand gala event was in prospect, by the pains you are taking to ornament the room,” Mrs. Fielding remarked with a smile.

Paul’s mother had been a celebrated beauty in her youth, and age, although it had whitened her nut-brown hair and placed a few lines on her placid brow, had failed to dispel the ineffable charm of her smile ; but the charm was somewhat rare, for since the death of her husband a great deal of the wonted joyousness of her nature lay buried in his grave.

“ And is not Paul’s coming home a grand gala event for both you and me ?” the girl answered, turning affectionately towards her companion. “ He has been absent a whole fortnight, you know, and although there is no place like home, especially when that home is the dear old Grange, and you are in it”—and Daisy Warriner, carelessly flinging her basket aside, threw herself on her knees before Mrs. Fielding, and taking hold of her hands, implanted a loving kiss upon them —“ yet Holmwood loses half its charm and brightness when Paul is away. There, I know you will indorse that sentiment heartily enough ! I shall be so glad to see him again, and hear all about London, and whether he has enjoyed himself ; but of *course* he has !” she added in a confident tone, with a stress on the “ of course.”

A shade passed undeniably over the mother’s brow as she listened ; maternal love such as hers is quick in perception even to a misfortune. Adoring her only son, and trembling lest aught should happen to disturb

the even current of his life, she was given to fancying trials and troubles in prospect for him, which were often but the offsprings of an anxious imagination. In the great event which would be for him the turning-point of bliss or woe—namely, matrimony, she had been woefully disappointed. In spite of Sybil Ashton's manifold attractions and wealth—for she was an heiress—Paul's mother, her faculties sharpened by infinite affection, detected faults in the *fiancée* which in her estimation were in nowise balanced by beauty and riches. She noted imperfection in temper, and a craving for general admiration, which to her ideas augured wondrously ill for a quiet existence, and boded far from a cloudless future for Paul, whose temperament was singularly sensitive, and whose habits were very domestic; moreover, his notions of women's conduct were unusually strict. But the die was cast. Sybil Ashton was to be his wife, whether she was suited to him or otherwise; and Mrs. Fielding, knowing that remonstrance or advice would avail nothing, and merely raise up an ill-feeling against herself, kept her fears and regrets within her own breast, and essayed to hope for the best. She had cherished for long years a desire that Daisy, the orphan of an old and valued friend, and the purest and gentlest of beings, should be Paul's wife; and the announcement of his betrothal to Sybil fell like a thunderbolt upon her, dispersing all her pleasant visions and plans. Instead of little Daisy, whom she loved already as though she had been her own child, a stranger maiden, with a haughty face and imperious ways, was to become an inmate of the old walls within which most of her happy and peaceful married life had been spent; and although both to leave the roof that would shelter Paul's head,

she had resolved to seek another dwelling when he brought home his bride.

"I trust that Paul *has* enjoyed himself," she said after a pause, during which her features had borne a sadder expression than usual. "But there is no certainty of happiness in this world, Daisy;" and tears glistened on her lashes as she spoke in a hopeless tone, which went straight to her hearer's heart; and, by way of sympathy, Daisy's orbs grew humid too.

"Of course he has been a great deal with Sybil in London, which in itself is a pleasure to him; that is, if she has been kind and gentle all the while; but Sybil's moods are a little changeable, you know. Daisy, do you like her?" she asked suddenly, looking full into the girl's face, as if to try and read a truthful answer to her query in the frank blue eyes and mobile face; but whether Daisy was embarrassed by the bluntness of the question, or whether she disliked avowing her real sentiments on the subject of Miss Ashton, she flushed scarlet and lowered her white lids for a moment before she replied.

"Yes, I like her," she said hesitatingly; "that is, sometimes. She is so strange, and appears now and then to hate the sight of me, but perhaps it is all fancy on my part. Any way, she loves Paul; and if she had ten thousand faults, I should forgive them all for the sake of that one virtue."

"Do you like Paul so much, then, that those who appreciate him find favour in your eyes?" interrogated the mother, curious to discover Daisy's real feelings towards him; and yet reluctant to find her fears confirmed, that the girl cherished an unfortunate attachment, which could only bring her misery.

"Like Paul! I love him with all my heart!" was the frank answer, given warmly and honestly. "And who could help loving him, that knew him—the best, dearest, and noblest of human beings! I do not believe there is any one to compare with him in the world—except one, perhaps," she murmured *sotto voce*, with a pretty blush, but the reservation did not reach her companion's ears.

"Come, dear, do not look so sad, or Paul will not believe how happy we are to have him back again; and here he is!" she exclaimed joyfully, as she flew out on the lawn, at the extremity of which Paul's figure was visible. He walked slowly, and his face looked terribly white and wan, while his eyes were tired and downcast; but when his glance fell upon his mother—who had risen from her seat and waited to welcome him at the window—it was as full of affection as ever. His first embrace was for her, and then he stooped and touched Daisy's forehead with his lips, and as he did so, a heavy sigh escaped him involuntarily.

"Why, Paul, what ails you?" Daisy asked in surprise; and, attracted by her words to his appearance, his mother gazed at him anxiously. The two pairs of eyes, though in truth they were filled with tenderness for him, yet seemed to him a difficult ordeal to stand in the perturbed state of his mind; and desirous of avoiding any explanation until he felt calmer and braver, he forced a slight laugh, and began busying himself in divesting his pocket of two small cases. The first one he opened and presented to Daisy; it contained a locket in the form of two hearts united by a lovers' wreath, and surmounted by the letters D. W. and E. F. in turquoises. The girl examined her gift

with delight, and blushing rosy red handed it for Mrs. Fielding's inspection.

"What is the meaning of the letters E. F.?" she asked in astonishment, after some moments spent in puzzling her head over the device.

Paul and Daisy exchanged glances, and in Paul's face, in spite of his misery, a gleam of mischief was visible as he replied :

"E. F., mother? They mean 'ever faithful,' to be sure! Daisy is a good true-hearted little thing, and so I fancied the words were very applicable."

Mrs. Fielding thought so too, and then she fell to wondering whether Paul really knew of the extent of Daisy's faithful love for him, or surely he would never have been so thoughtlessly cruel as to try her feelings by such a present. It appeared such a mockery to offer to one who was the victim of an unrequited affection, the emblem of happy and mutual love. She was aroused from her reverie by the tones of her son's voice sounding strange and broken to her ears.

"And here is something for *you*, mother, which I know *you* will not fail to prize;" and he put into her hand a beautifully painted miniature of himself. He had taken it off Sybil Ashton's desk as he left her, thinking that she would not care to keep it when she could cast him off so heartlessly. Mrs. Fielding stared at the portrait aghast, and then at the original. His face, pale as ashes, yet bore an impassive look, save an uncontrollable quiver on his mouth, and a tortured expression in his deep honest eyes.

"Paul, what on earth is the meaning of this? Why, this picture belongs to Sybil!" she exclaimed, hastily.

"It means that——" But poor Paul broke down

completely ; while his mother, in utter consternation, saw him bow his head on the table, and fancied, horror-struck, that a sound very much resembling a sob burst from his breast. In another minute both she and Daisy were beside him, listening to his incoherent words.

“ Sybil and I have parted, mother—parted for ever ; and I feel as if it will be difficult for me to look up again. It seems as if the world had grown suddenly dark, and that life has no more hope or light for me. But do not blame *her*. It is all my fault ; I cannot make her as happy as she desires to be, so it was better to say good-bye.”

Mrs. Fielding’s lips—although her nature was good and amiable—curled a little scornfully at the notion of her son failing to make any woman happy ; and she could not help resenting inwardly that Miss Ashton was so difficult to please. It struck her that Daisy ought to be in a heaven of bliss, now that Paul was free again, and she turned quickly to look at her ; but Daisy’s young face was bathed with tears, and Paul’s unhappiness was reflected sympathizingly in her whole countenance. Believing, as she fully did, in the existence of excellence in human nature, Mrs. Fielding could hardly bring herself to credit that so much unselfishness found a place in a woman’s heart, that Daisy could so utterly forget the fulfilment of her own desire in sorrow for Paul’s evident unhappiness.

Paul lifted up his head in a little while, to find his mother’s eyes fixed tearfully upon him. There was an expression of pity in them too ; and although it *was* his mother who pitied him, his pride rebelled against it. Both she and Daisy were silent, knowing

that such suffering as his could not be ameliorated by any attempts at consolation. Probably in that very moment, when the bitterness of losing Sybil was fresh, he exaggerated her merits tenfold within himself, and felt that nothing would ever reconcile him to his loss. Time alone was the only healer for his ailment. He longed to be alone, to be able to indulge in his grief without witnesses; to be able to dwell undisturbed on Sybil's image that filled his whole heart, until the thought that he never again should clasp her to him or call her "wife" drove him, calm, sensible, reasonable being as he was, nigh to a frenzy of which he felt ashamed. He loved the two sympathizing faces beside him, and yet he hated their presence. Sybil, cruel, heartless, and fickle, was all he wanted upon earth. Her faults were dearer in his eyes than others' virtues; her very jealousy that had separated them was precious to him, since it proved that she loved him. He had done his duty, and conscience was approving, but life seemed an utter blank, and existence without Sybil was worthless. To crown all, the thought that the woman he loved would belong to another kept rising before him, and crushing all hope and brightness out of his breast. And this was the man, broken in spirit, weary of living, of whom Mrs. Ashton had spoken so harshly, of whom even Sybil herself had been sceptical!

"I think I'll go and take a turn in the garden—the air may do me good," Paul said, quietly; and without a word his companions let him pass out.

Then the two women looked at each other, and, after the fashion of their sex, both cried and embraced, and then grew calmer.

"Daisy," murmured the elder lady after a pause, "now that the matter is ended, it is a relief to me to

tell you that the idea of Paul's marriage with Sybil Ashton has caused me infinite pain and anxiety. She is not suited to him in the very least."

"She is not half good enough for him," Daisy answered, warmly, while she looked angry and indignant. "I feel certain that the rupture is her doing and not his, and yet, with his usual kindness and consideration, he wants us to believe he only is in fault. It breaks my heart to see dear Paul suffer so!" And big tears came into the girl's blue eyes, making them look like violets glistening with dew.

"He may get over it, and learn to be thankful that a rupture has occurred," the mother said, fervently. Her wish was father to the hope, but she was in truth doubtful of so happy a result. She knew Paul's true steadfast nature too well to think that he would easily forget one that he had allowed to creep into his heart, until losing Sybil was like losing a part of himself. "And perhaps, Daisy, some one may console him completely for Miss Ashton," Mrs. Fielding added, with a meaning look. She was not fitted to be jesuitical in the least, and her attempt to discover how the land lay was puny and futile.

"I trust and pray he may soon be himself again!"

And as Daisy spoke, Mrs. Fielding wondered that her face did not change or colour. The pretty blue eyes shone with honest feeling, but there was no love-light in their depths as they met Paul's mother's penetrating gaze; and the soft rosy lips, when they uttered a wish for Paul's renewed peace of mind, had no nervous tremble upon them, such as a concealed attachment, with its attendant fears and hopes, would have given. The very candour on the white brow was unpromising; yet Mrs. Fielding went on—

"It seems a strange time to talk of Paul's future happiness, just as he has returned to us, broken and miserable; but we are all apt to be selfish, you know, Daisy, and I have had so many painful hours lately, that I cannot help wishing I had something pleasant and peaceful to look forward to."

"I wish I could give you peace and happiness for the rest of your life," murmured Daisy, affectionately, nestling up to Mrs. Fielding's side, and stroking her plump white hand caressingly.

"And so you can!"

"I?" exclaimed the girl in unfeigned surprise.

"Yes, you; by making Paul love you, and by becoming his wife!"

Poor Daisy turned as white as her namesake flower, and looked as though she were on the point of swooning, while she let go her hold of her companion and shrank into herself. She felt terribly like a culprit—wicked, and basely ungrateful for all the care and tenderness that had been lavished on her for long years; but she was silent only for a moment, feeling that she could not be guilty of deception for all the world.

"Much as I care for Paul, I could *never* become his wife," she articulated almost inaudibly, with hot cheeks and quivering lips; but she was heard plainly enough.

"And why not?" Mrs. Fielding spoke out sharply, for the first time in her life, to the orphan whom she had always treated with a mother's love. The sharpness of the tone struck cruelly on Daisy's ears, and hanging down her head, she stood silent and trembling.

"Like the rest of the world," Mrs. Fielding said,

bitterly ; “ apparently sincere, in reality deceitful. I thought you loved Paul so much ; that he was all that is noble and good in mankind ; that no one on earth was to be compared with him ; and yet, like the generality of women, when you might secure this *rara avis* for yourself, you begin to vacillate and to shrink back, and are loth to insure happiness to the man because you are not certain of your own mind. Daisy, I believed better things of you. I *did* think that you looked on Holmwood as your real home—upon Paul and myself as the two dearest to you in the world. I could have staked my existence on your affection for us—on your love for Paul !”

“ I care for you and Paul with all my heart,” sobbed Daisy. “ I shall never forget your kindness to me, even if you turn against me now and send me from you.” And at the vision of her expulsion from the dear old Grange, the girl’s tears coursed rapidly down her pale cheeks. “ But I could never marry Paul, even if he wished it.”

Her auditor’s mouth curled scornfully, and with an uncontrollable gesture she pushed Daisy a little away from her ; but Daisy clung to her arm with gentle force, and looked up wistfully and deprecatingly into the angry face.

“ Again may I ask why it is so impossible for you to become my son’s wife ?”

The question was put in a formal crushing tone, and Daisy felt that it was scarcely the moment for a love confidence ; but there was no help for her. It seemed so hard to the lonely child, whose own mother was sleeping in her narrow grave, that in the very event of her life, which to her young heart seemed the gravest and most engrossing, she was deprived of a



single sympathizing ear—that no single loving voice would whisper kind words of hope for her happiness and *his*.

“Because I love another. I love Everard Forrester,” she said shyly; and as she uttered the name, the colour came back to her face and the light to her eyes.

Mrs. Fielding stared aghast, as she realized the demolition of her darling castle in the air. “And Paul has known this all the while, and approves?”

Daisy bowed her head in assent.

“Both Paul and you have been in league to deceive me. Those letters on the locket stand for Everard Forrester, and not for ‘Ever Faithful.’”

“*Madre mia*, they stand for both! Everard and I have been engaged for months—ever since the ball at Christmas time; but we have been obliged to keep our secret, for his father has sworn to disinherit him if he marries a dowerless girl. So we live in hope that some day the old man may change his mind, and let us be happy. Paul has known all about it, but he thought it would worry you to hear how uncertain everything is. But we never wished to deceive you; and you will not refuse to give Everard and me your blessing when we *do* marry, will you?” she added, raising her pleading eyes.

For all answer Mrs. Fielding stooped and kissed her, while the utter vanity of human desires passed through her mind as she did so. Paul was a free man. His engagement to Sybil was at an end, a desideratum which she had long had at heart; but Daisy, the prize that she had always looked upon as entirely within her son’s grasp, was out of his reach. Daisy felt a tear fall on her face with the embrace she received.

“Do not grieve so—Paul will be happy yet,” she said, soothingly. “I feel sure that Miss Ashton will discover his sterling worth directly she thinks she has lost him ; and there will be no sacrifice too great for her to make, in the hope of winning him back.”

“If so, Heaven grant that it may turn out for his happiness. So good a son surely deserves a good wife, and a loving and faithful heart ; but to my ideas, Sybil Ashton will give no more thoughts to a discarded lover than she would to a worn-out glove.”

And Paul, as he paced sadly up and down the garden-walk, was of his mother’s opinion. Sybil, with her manifold attractions, had never lacked admirers even when her betrothed was by her side ; and Paul had suffered many a pang in silence, as he noted the beaming smiles she so lavishly dispensed to the butterflies around. He knew that expostulation was useless with one so wilful and spoilt as his beautiful love, so he had controlled himself, and had trusted to the effects of his own deep affection to wean her from all that was distasteful in his sight. Once his wife, he felt assured her fancy would never run astray, and, guarded by the shield of his mighty affection, he thought, like Cæsar’s spouse, she should never even be suspected ; but now, absent from him, free to accept the addresses of other men, beset by flatterers, intoxicated by the admiration which was her due, poor Paul knew that there was no stability of feeling in her on which he could anchor a hope that he would not be easily forgotten.

The evening shadows had fallen, but through the gloom he fancied he saw Sybil’s eyes flashing brightly, and her proud lips smiling sweetly, although it was but a matter of hours since he and she had said good-

bye. The fancy was bad enough, cutting him to the soul, and Paul strove to drive it away from him. "Surely," he murmured to himself, "she will bury the dead love quite out of sight ere she looks upon a fresh one with favour."

Fortunately for him, the gift of clairvoyance is a rare one, or the suffering of his sleepless sight would have been tenfold greater.

It was about ten days after his return to Holmwood that Paul entered the breakfast-room one morning with an open letter in his hand, and his face whiter and more weary-looking than ever.

"Daisy," he said, in a low voice, which he tried vainly to steady, while an ashen hue crept over his features, "here is news for both you and me. Everard's father, seized with apoplexy, died suddenly yesterday, and Everard Forrester, master of his actions at last, comes to Holmwood as soon as the funeral is over. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your future happiness;" and he pressed a brotherly kiss on her blooming face. "And now, Daisy, congratulate me in return. Sybil Ashton has forgotten me already, and has pledged herself to old Sir Courtenay Hayes!"

PART III.

EVERARD FORRESTER proved no laggard in love, and as soon as the proper period of mourning for his father had expired, he hastened to make Daisy his wife; so that before the autumnal leaves had all been swept away in a wintry blast, she was back from her honey-

moon, lightening the old Grange for a while with her bright face ere she left it to become the mistress of a home of her own.

To Paul the seasons seemed all alike, now that no single gleam of sunshine visited his breast. And as the close of the year drew on, he threw himself greatly into the excitement of field sports, in order to find oblivion from thought, which the quietude of his fire-side denied him. Meanwhile, Sybil Ashton passed sleepless nights and feverish days, thinking over her coming marriage, or "death," as she inwardly called it. Paul was in her heart and in her head, and the more she essayed to drive away his memory, the more his image seemed to cling to her.

The tidings of Daisy's wedding had awakened her to the knowledge that her insane jealousy had indeed been groundless, and as a natural consequence of such a conclusion, her love for Paul had increased tenfold. And even in all her unhappiness there was inexpressible balm in the belief that he had been true to the core, even while she had so wickedly doubted him. Alas, and she had reaped the punishment of her mad scepticism by the sacrifice of her whole life; for it appeared impossible to her to break the chain whose links she had flung round herself in folly and pique. If she had been less dutiful she would have resented her mother's conduct; but no longer impetuous or wilful, struck down by the weight of misery, she allowed herself to be guided by Mrs. Ashton in everything, feeling a blank despair, with which she had no energy to cope.

It was at Mrs. Ashton's desire that Sybil consented to visit the country place which was to be her own; but when Mrs. Ashton had manœuvred to throw her daughter more with her affianced husband than she

ould be in the gaities of London, she had not been aware that Ravenshill—Sir Courtenay's residence—was situated within a few miles of Holmwood Grange.

It was too late to draw back, when arrangements for the move were made, without exciting Sir Courtenay's curiosity, so she allowed the plan to be carried out, resolved to guard vigilantly against a chance meeting between Sybil and her old love. And Sybil herself, for her credit be it averred, was unwilling to risk an interview which could only render her more unfit for pursuing the path in life that Fate had marked out for her.

Ravenshill was one of the show-places of the county—a handsome brick structure with mullioned windows, and a vast amount of elaborate fretwork; and the large grounds were laid out carefully, but in a formal Italian style.

Like its owner, *old* Sir Courtenay Hayes—as Paul had irreverently styled him—the place bore upon it rather an old-fashioned aspect. The Baronet, whose lineage was long, and whose coffers were overflowing, was, in truth, a little given to pomposity and prosiness; but in spite of his age and his Grandisonian manners, he was very popular with the fair sex. Sybil Ashton, whom he had chosen for a wife from amidst myriads of beauties that had fluttered and blushed at the approach of so eligible a *parti*, would doubtless have respected and liked him as a friend, but found him unutterably distasteful as a lover. His little weaknesses, that all her friends were to, were exaggerated by her into grave faults, and notwithstanding the liberality and kindness he displayed towards her and hers, for her participation in the goods that were poured into his daughter's lap, Sybil shrank from him and his

companionship with an uncontrollable repugnance that was often scarcely disguised. But Sir Courtenay, frank and straightforward himself, never dreamt that the woman who had accepted him, without any apparent coercion, could be so worldly and false as to have done so from mere motives of interest, more especially as Sybil, having money, did not require to sell herself for riches or land.

Her engagement to Paul, by the express desire of Mrs. Ashton, had been kept secret, and Sir Courtenay, an *habitué* of London, had never heard of any former attachment on the part of his betrothed.

Paul was fully revenged for all the misery Sybil had inflicted on him in the never-ceasing regret she felt. Oftentimes, when an unbearable sense of wretchedness stole over her, she felt an impulse to fling herself on the Baronet's clemency, and confessing her unconquerable attachment to Paul, implore her freedom.

It appeared to her that to be rid of Sir Courtenay, even without Paul, would be bliss in comparison to the torture she would suffer in becoming Lady Hayes, forced to conceal a breaking heart beneath a conventional smile. But her courage to be honest and true never reached a height ere it was dashed away by the covert sneers and reproaches of her mother, who with her usual shrewdness divined the gigantic struggle in the poor girl's soul. And thus the date of the unlucky marriage had been fixed without a word of remonstrance escaping the victim's lips.

The very luxuries surrounding her, instead of reconciling her to her lot, were loathsome in her sight, as she recollected how they were to be gained ; and the prospect of living half her days in such close contiguity to Paul, and yet separated from him by an impassable

barrier, was one on which she looked with infinite alarm. For Sybil never quibbled with her conscience, and she knew quite well that if she tried to do her duty by Sir Courtenay, Paul's presence would be the worst thing in the world to assist her efforts; for she fully believed that her love for him was ten thousand times stronger than herself, and she never indulged in such sophistry as to suppose that when Paul was sole master of her feelings, she could look upon him coldly and unmoved, for the simple reason that her hand was another's.

It was not a pleasant sight to witness Sir Courtenay and his betrothed pacing side by side in the silent shrubberies of Ravenshill. They were as ill-mated as May and December; he, with his tall figure bent, and with the frosts of age crowning his head; and she, with a form of youth and grace, and with bright tresses on her brow that flashed beneath the sunlight. Yet, strange to say, he was the pleasanter sight of the two; for though his gait was slouching, and his features bore on them the hard grip of Time's fingers, yet there was a serenity in his eyes and a genial smile upon his lips.

Sybil's haughty beauty was in as great perfection as ever, save that she was white—as white as the snow-drops that reared their little heads on the wintry paths; but sorrow had not dimmed the fire of her glance, or given her a meeker bearing. In truth, to all appearance she had grown prouder and more stately than before; but her mouth wore a perpetual curve that savoured more of bitterness than laughter, and her voice was less musical than it was wont to be; at times it sounded strangely hard and harsh, and, worse than all else, the thick lashes fell continually over the

grey eyes, not from shyness, but from duplicity ; for Sybil dared not let Sir Courtenay read the tale that those eyes would have told.

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She and her mother and Sir Courtenay were driving through the lonely country lanes when a horseman passed, at the sight of whom Sybil's breath came quick, and her heart fluttered like a bird's. Paul, with a grave bow to all the party, passed quietly on his way, and was quickly out of sight.

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And so the days slipped by in quietude at palatial Ravenshill, but each one seemed darker and darker to her whose death in life was so near.

None could have recognised in the girl, cast hopelessly down on the floor of her room, with the door fast locked to keep out prying witnesses to her bitter grief—a weeping Magdalen with her long hair hanging carelessly down her fair shoulders, and her eyes dimmed with tears—the cold and scornful beauty that Sybil was to the world. But poor Sybil's strength was oozing fast, and since she had noted the pallor on Paul's face when she saw him last, and her heart had whispered that that pallor came from loss of her, she had lost even the false courage that wounded pride or vanity had lent her for a little while. And Sir Courtenay, as he marked how fragile the girl had suddenly become, and how much the rounded cheek had lost its contour, loaded her with presents and kindness that made her position doubly difficult; for she could have

moon, lightening the old Grange for a while with her bright face ere she left it to become the mistress of a home of her own.

To Paul the seasons seemed all alike, now that no single gleam of sunshine visited his breast. And as the close of the year drew on, he threw himself greatly into the excitement of field sports, in order to find oblivion from thought, which the quietude of his fire-side denied him. Meanwhile, Sybil Ashton passed sleepless nights and feverish days, thinking over her coming marriage, or "death," as she inwardly called it. Paul was in her heart and in her head, and the more she essayed to drive away his memory, the more his image seemed to cling to her.

The tidings of Daisy's wedding had awakened her to the knowledge that her insane jealousy had indeed been groundless, and as a natural consequence of such a conclusion, her love for Paul had increased tenfold. And even in all her unhappiness there was inexpressible balm in the belief that he had been true to the core, even while she had so wickedly doubted him. Alas, and she had reaped the punishment of her mad scepticism by the sacrifice of her whole life; for it appeared impossible to her to break the chain whose links she had flung round herself in folly and pique. If she had been less dutiful she would have resented her mother's conduct; but no longer impetuous or wilful, struck down by the weight of misery, she allowed herself to be guided by Mrs. Ashton in everything, feeling a blank despair, with which she had no energy to cope.

It was at Mrs. Ashton's desire that Sybil consented to visit the country place which was to be her own; but when Mrs. Ashton had manœuvred to throw her daughter more with her affianced husband than she

could be in the gaieties of London, she had not been aware that Ravenshill—Sir Courtenay's residence—was situated within a few miles of Holmwood Grange.

It was too late to draw back, when arrangements for the move were made, without exciting Sir Courtenay's curiosity, so she allowed the plan to be carried out, resolved to guard vigilantly against a chance meeting between Sybil and her old love. And Sybil herself, to her credit be it averred, was unwilling to risk an interview which could only render her more unfit for pursuing the path in life that Fate had marked out for her.

Ravenshill was one of the show-places of the county—a handsome brick structure with mullioned windows, and a vast amount of elaborate fretwork; and the large grounds were laid out carefully, but in a formal Italian style.

Like its owner, *old* Sir Courtenay Hayes—as Paul had irreverently styled him—the place bore upon it rather an old-fashioned aspect. The Baronet, whose lineage was long, and whose coffers were overflowing, was, in truth, a little given to pomposity and prosiness; but in spite of his age and his Grandisonian manners, he was very popular with the fair sex. Sybil Ashton, whom he had chosen for a wife from amidst myriads of beauties that had fluttered and blushed at the approach of so eligible a *parti*, would doubtless have respected and liked him as a friend, but found him unutterably distasteful as a lover. His little weaknesses, that all flesh is heir to, were exaggerated by her into grave faults; and notwithstanding the liberality and kindness he always displayed towards her and hers, for her mother participated in the goods that were poured into the daughter's lap, Sybil shrank from him and his

companionship with an uncontrollable repugnance that was often scarcely disguised. But Sir Courtenay, frank and straightforward himself, never dreamt that the woman who had accepted him, without any apparent coercion, could be so worldly and false as to have done so from mere motives of interest, more especially as Sybil, having money, did not require to sell herself for riches or land.

Her engagement to Paul, by the express desire of Mrs. Ashton, had been kept secret, and Sir Courtenay, an *habitué* of London, had never heard of any former attachment on the part of his betrothed.

Paul was fully revenged for all the misery Sybil had inflicted on him in the never-ceasing regret she felt. Oftentimes, when an unbearable sense of wretchedness stole over her, she felt an impulse to fling herself on the Baronet's clemency, and confessing her unconquerable attachment to Paul, implore her freedom.

It appeared to her that to be rid of Sir Courtenay, even without Paul, would be bliss in comparison to the torture she would suffer in becoming Lady Hayes, forced to conceal a breaking heart beneath a conventional smile. But her courage to be honest and true never reached a height ere it was dashed away by the covert sneers and reproaches of her mother, who with her usual shrewdness divined the gigantic struggle in the poor girl's soul. And thus the date of the unlucky marriage had been fixed without a word of remonstrance escaping the victim's lips.

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better confessed the truth to one who was less generous and considerate to her. So the time went on, and Sybil remained dumb.

It wanted but three days to the wedding, and Sybil counted each moment with a desperate feeling at her heart. The sun had gone down in all his glory, and the cool air stirred the leaves, making them rustle softly and pleasantly. Sybil, glad to leave the house that she looked upon as a lifelong prison, strolled slowly on the lawn. Sir Courtenay had been out hunting all day, and the evening meal was postponed until his return. As the shadows slanted down darker on the earth, Mrs. Ashton grew anxious, and Sybil, even though engrossed by her own sorrow, fell to wondering what had delayed Sir Courtenay's return so long. Perchance—and Sybil felt her pulse quicken at the very thought, and shrank like a guilty thing within herself as she recognised a thrill of joy at the bare notion of freedom—something had happened. But the fancy was quickly dispelled by the sight of the Baronet slowly riding up to the gates. His features were so grave and white that they elicited a remark from Mrs. Ashton at once.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked.

“Very much the matter. We had an excellent run, but the sport was spoiled by a fearful accident—a man, and one of the best riders in the county, too, crushed under his horse. We picked him up, and carried him home. Poor fellow! he just breathes, and that's all!”

“Who is he?”

“Fielding, you know, whom we——” But he was interrupted by a shrill cry of anguish that seemed to rend the air.

“Paul!” And Sybil fell senseless on the earth.

The wedding-day arrived, but she who was to have been the bride was raving in paroxysms of brain-fever; and Sir Courtenay, as he listened with strained ears to the name of "Paul," that the poor pale lips kept repeating over and over again, felt his anger at having been duped melt into a sincere compassion for the sufferer.

And while Sybil hovered on the confines of the tomb, Paul, whose life had been despaired of, was slowly regaining his strength. Heaven had hearkened to his mother's prayers, and had spared her only son.

When at last he was sufficiently restored to health to be able to creep about the Grange, a mere shadow, it is true, Sir Courtenay Hayes visited him. Those who saw Paul Fielding after that interview, could hardly have believed that he was the same man who had risen that day pale and weary and hopeless. A bright light was in his eyes, a smile played on his mouth, and hope lived in his heart, for he had heard words whose potent influence, he thought, would have snatched him even from the jaws of the grave. He had heard that Sybil loved him, and that he or death would alone possess her! And he never doubted that she would live. His Sybil, so beautiful and so bright and so beloved! He felt that the mighty love he had for her *must* shield her from every harm. Confident that happiness had come to him at last, he went to Ravenshill to claim his wife; but his heart sank as he bent over Sybil, and saw, not only a pallid face and wasted form, but eyes burning with feverish light, and parched lips dropping incoherent words. Stooping low, he strove to catch their meaning, and as he listened he knew that the throbs of Sybil's heart came faint and slow.

"It was pity that made him keep to me so long!" she murmured, in piteous accents. "It is you, Paul,

who have decided our future, in choosing between Daisy Warriner and me! You have never loved me, Paul!"

Not loved her! And the man's strong nature melted into the tears of an infant, while he seized her in his arms, and strained her to him desperately, sending up a frantic prayer to Heaven to spare her to him. Not loved her! when ever since the miserable day they had parted his life had been a blank, and death would have been a boon unspeakable!

"Sybil, Sybil!" he implored, as though the persuasion of his accents would penetrate her ear. "See, I am here; no one can separate us now, my own—my wife!"

"Wife!" The last word struck a chord in her wandering brain. Shivering all over, she started from his hold, and clasping her poor thin hands together, fixed her gaze on his face.

"Wife! Sir Courtenay, no, no; not your wife! I cannot, I *dare* not be your wife, for I love Paul—Paul who is dead—*crushed*! But I shall see him again; not here, but there!" and she pointed upwards, opening her eyes wide. In that moment she recognised Fielding.

"Paul! I *have* come to you!" she cried out joyfully, flinging her arms round his neck, and smiling up brightly in his face. And in that caress she passed away from earth.





JUST A DREAM.

PART I.



HE midsummer sun shone down upon the charming little village of Mayfield, and this was the pretty domestic picture that its rays lit up :

A cottage with slanting roof, and broad latticed windows, and whitewashed walls gleaming through tangled masses of woodbine and scented tea-rose. A narrow gravelled path leading up straight from the little green gate, with nodding grass and blooming flowers, nestling close together on either side ; and a few big trees as a background to the whole. The tiny domain enclosed by a low stone wall, and over the wall—under the shadow of a tall laburnum, whose fallen petals formed a carpet of golden tissue for her feet—the leaning figure of a young girl.

A girl with great laughing eyes and dimpled cheeks, with Hebe's face and Aphrodite's form. Her straw hat hung on a neighbouring branch ; and her rich nut-brown hair, tossed back carelessly with an impetuous movement, displayed a candid, intelligent brow, and a pair of sweet childlike lips slightly apart, as with upturned face she intently watched the fleecy

cloudlets chasing one another through heaven's blue vault, and listened to the singing of the birds hard by. She was revelling in her new-found liberty, this maiden who had reached her seventeenth year on this glorious day of summer. Released from the trammels of the schoolroom, she felt as though she had thrown off the iron chains of slavery, and was free—free as the balmy air and the floating butterflies. She was motherless, and the only child of a bookworm—a dabbler in ancient lore—whose *fidus Achates* were Plato and Plutarch, and whose familiar subjects were all the “ologies.” Plunged in grief at the death of a wife whom he had adored, he took to study as a mode of oblivion, and immersed in musty folios, he sometimes forgot that he *had* a daughter, and yet she was unutterably dear to his heart.

She was a wild little creature, this Ethel West, or Ethie as she was usually called; she was full of the exuberant spirits of childhood, and her greatest enjoyment seemed to be derived from running through the verdant woods and fields, and tanning her lovely face a rich brown shade to match her lustrous tresses.

Listen to her soliloquy as she leans upon the wall—

“What can papa mean by saying that I am just commencing my battle with life? Battle indeed, when all is so bright and so peaceful! I could stay here for ever, with the breeze fanning my cheek so sweetly. I like to see the blue smoke curling through the trees and going upwards, upwards, until it loses itself in that strange-shaped cloud; I love to see the butterflies skimming over the flower-beds, and the bees, and everything else that seem so gay. Why do people say, ‘Life is a mistake,’ and shake their wise heads, and

look sad and ominous? Life is delicious on such a day as this, and I feel as happy as a bird!"

And she broke off two big clusters of yellow blossom from her canopy, and placed one in her bosom and one in her hair, with all the coquetry of a girl in her teens, and then, glancing down the road to see if any one was coming who might notice her attempt at finery, she descried a figure in the distance.

Mayfield was quite a rural locality; and the appearance of its inhabitants, few in number, was very familiar to one another. Ethie shaded her azure eyes with her tiny hand, while she tried to discover which of the Mayfield magnates was now in view. It was not the village Æsculapius, she knew, for he was low of stature, and inclined to obesity; neither was it the new curate, who was fragile in form, and, in spite of his evangelical notions, sported an eye-glass; nor was it the Squire of Glenford Manor, for he was a Methuselah in years, and as red as a rose. Ethie was nonplussed. But meanwhile the figure had nearly reached the end of the garden-wall, and under the shade she was able to reconnoitre his personal appearance.

A very tall man, and athletic enough; dark eyes, large and deeply set beneath straight well-defined brows; a nose and chin after the antique, and a thick moustache over the full lips; and about the whole countenance a good deal of weakness and indecision; but as Ethie was no disciple of Lavater, she only saw the handsomest man that her eyes had ever fallen upon. Upon arriving at the gate, he stood undecided as to the locality of the bell. Ethie advanced with a vivid blush on her cheeks.

"Who is it you desire to see?" she asked him, shyly.

The visitor, starting at the apparition before him, kept silence for a minute or so. He was a painter, with a painter's eye for the beautiful; and in one quick glance he took in all her attractions, and longed to perpetuate them on his canvas. He already saw the picture in his mind—the low white cottage, the flowers, the grass, the drooping branches, and in the foreground the girl's sweet speaking face and graceful form.

"Mr. West lives here, I believe, and I have a letter of introduction and some books for him," he told her in a singularly musical voice.

Ethel invited him in, and flew to acquaint her father of his arrival; then she rushed breathlessly up to her own room, and smoothed a wealth of curls that zephyr's breath had ruffled, and donned a fresh white dress. Then she slowly descended the stairs, and entered the drawing-room with all the dignity of a demoiselle who had undergone several campaigns in town.

"Ethie, my dear, Mr. Seymour has been asking my permission to sketch you; he tells me that yours is just the face he has been seeking for the principal figure in the new picture he is painting for the Exhibition this year; and I have promised him you shall sit, if it is of service to him."

"And you *will* do so, Miss West?" Seymour demanded eagerly. "It will be an inestimable boon to me; for your hair is just the shade I require, and the features correspond exactly with it, which is a rare thing in nature," he added in an aside to her father, while a mute eloquence in his expression made Ethie blush scarlet.

These were the first flattering words that she had listened to, and they sounded very pleasantly to her ears. She felt his eyes upon her, but she could not cavil at a look which, though steady, was neither bold nor disrespectful. She said nothing, but smiled an acquiescence to his request. And then Mr. West, eager to pore over his newly-acquired treasures, retired to his study, and the artist and his model were left alone.

A feeling of nervousness stole over Ethie as her father left the room. But Seymour was a man of the world, and came to the rescue at once.

"May I see your garden, Miss West?"

"Certainly;" and she scolded herself immediately for her stupid little answer, but had no courage to add to it.

They descended the steps that led to a large well-kept parterre and shrubbery behind the house, walking side by side, but saying nothing. At length she ventured a remark.

"Are you staying in the village for any time?"

"Only for a week or two, to gather materials for pictures. Your county is celebrated for its beauty, you know."

"Yes;" and then not knowing what to talk about, she said, "I like the front of the cottage better than this; do you?"

"Yes;" and Seymour put on a sentimental tone as he went on, "for it was there I first saw you. I shall never forget it."

Ethie tried to look up gratefully for his kind words, but instead of it her eyes sought the ground steadily, with intense gratification filling her soul.

"Who were you waiting for at the garden-wall?"

he questioned presently, with all the authority of an incipient lover; and she never resented the freedom, but answered with truth and frankness written on her brow—

“For no one. It is my birthday, and I wished to pass it in my favourite place. I am never lonely there, with the flowers and the sunbeams making it look so bright.”

“But you *were* waiting for some one,” he persisted with a serious look.

Ethie contradicted the fact with a shake of her little head and a puzzled expression on her features.

“Yes, the Fates had ordained it! You were watching and waiting for me.”

The girl did not even smile; she only mused over his assertion, and thought it would be very pleasant to watch and wait for him always.

PART II.

A COUPLE of weeks had glided by since Ethie had first looked on Ernest Seymour. The sun shone bright as ever, and the birds sung quite as blithely, but she was changed. She had turned from a wild, happy, laughter-loving child into a serious, thinking, loving woman. Even a casual observer with ordinary powers of perception could scarcely have failed to note the depth of shadow that lay in the erewhile beaming eyes. The rosy lips parted less frequently in a smile, and there was a something suggestive of her feelings in the very action which pushed the hair off her forehead as she leant her cheek pensively on her hand. *She was watching and waiting for Seymour now;*

day by day at the same hour she leant on the old stone wall, and day by day her watching had been rewarded by a presence which had become dearer to her than life. He never failed to keep the tryst—ostensibly to sketch her face, in reality to steal away her heart.

The easel was placed under the laburnum, the drooping foliage of which concealed it from the view of the passers-by. In that little green nook the happiest hours had passed that Ethie had ever known. Sweeter phrases had fallen from Seymour's lips than strokes from his skilful brush. At the onset the extreme beauty of his sitter had absorbed him in his art in spite of himself, and Ophelia, Evangeline, Louise de la Vallière, Diane of Poitiers, and many another beside, owned Ethie's face for theirs.

"I cannot surely be like that," she would say to him, stealing on tiptoe and peeping in delighted admiration and astonishment at the glowing image of loveliness depicted on the canvas.

"Yes, only a thousand times more beautiful," he would murmur in impassioned accents; and then he would take her gently by the arm, and place her full face, profile, gazing upwards like a devotee, or bending lowly as a Magdalene. She was a mine of wealth to him for years to come, he said; and then he would stoop and look into her eyes to see the rush of happiness that welled up into them at his words. "There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream." Mr. West, wrapped up in his books, never dreamt of breaking the spell that was cast over his motherless child, and so the two, undisturbed, drifted unconsciously into an intimacy, and became "Ernest" and "Ethie" to each other. After an hour's sketching,

he would rest, although it was but a labour of love after all, and not very arduous in its nature; but he preferred to sit idly there, with his fingers toying with her hair as she knelt on the grass beside him. He spoke and she listened, and more than this Ethie never wanted. There would come long pauses, more expressive than speech, during which it pleased him to watch the changing colour on her soft cheek, and to try and catch the shy furtive glance that she dared not indulge in too long.

"Tell me about London," she said one day.

Seymour smiled gravely.

"About London, child? Be content with your Arcadia here, and do not strive to look beyond. It will be a cruel hand that draws the veil aside which hides the world from you. The world is a dreadful place, Ethie!" and he shook his head, and then laughed outright as he saw her look of amazement and horror.

"The world couldn't be dreadful with *you* there," she replied, innocently showing how he had become the Alpha and Omega of everything. And yet he sat on, letting her dream, and showing no mercy.

"Tell me all about your life."

Seymour started; his life, full of folly and dissipation, on which he could not look back himself unabashed! To reveal to this fresh young girl the unworthy pleasures his soul had been steeped in, the senseless pursuits in which so many an hour had been passed—the very notion was a desecration!—so he averted the query.

"London is exactly like Mayfield, except that there are more people and fewer trees, and far less happiness."

"I should like to judge for myself," said Ethie; "but papa would be miserable away from his beloved books, and I have not the heart to ask him to go. I wish I had a brother, Ernest," and she looked very pretty and pathetic as she wished.

"Should I do? But no, I should not at all care to have you for a *sister*," and he regarded her fixedly as he emphasized the last word.

Ethie felt the hot blood mount up to her blue-veined temples, but she managed to stammer out—

"Why not?"

"Because——" and then he paused, rose abruptly, and clasping her hand, said, "I must go;" and nothing more.

The girl watched his receding form with straining eyes and beating heart, until the turn in the road hid him quite from her view; and then, with the elasticity of youth and hope, she bounded gaily into the house, humming a favourite air of Seymour's, and saying to herself, "To-morrow he will be here again. I wish to-morrow was come!"

PART III.

SEYMOUR's stay of a fortnight had now lengthened into several weeks. When the village clock struck eleven A.M. Ethie knew that he would come; and one morning, after having placed the easel and arranged the brushes for him, as was her daily work, she found that it yet wanted three-quarters to the appointed time, but she did not mind waiting, for she had plenty to think about. There were no thoughts now to spare to the blueness of the skies, the humming of the bees,

or the curling of the smoke. Winter or summer were all alike, so long as the bliss of the "present" remained. Ernest was the sole axle on which her mind revolved. She pictured to herself the unutterable happiness of being his wife; but would such happiness be hers? She would never know joy again if aught parted them from one another now; and just when she had come to this mournful conclusion she saw him approaching. She knew that he could not see her where she stood, so she could gaze with her whole soul in her eyes on that most beloved face, then fearful with true love's timidity that he should find her watching him, she went into the house. Five minutes later, she walked slowly forwards to meet him with a new-born dignity and reserve that Nature gave her as a disguise for the feelings within. With all the unconsciousness that she could act, she held out her hand by way of greeting. He took it, and quickly released it.

"Ethie, sit for me just once again?" he pleaded softly.

"Yes, but I thought you wished to do the house? I am sure there can be no new position left for me to sit in."

"Never mind: do what I ask," he urged.

"To-morrow, then?"

"Ethie, there will be no to-morrow for me here; I leave this afternoon," he blurted out boldly and suddenly, but with a stab at his heart as he marked the blanching cheek; but in spite of his remorse, he experienced an anxiety to see the effect of his words. And what did he see—tears, emotion?

No, she only stooped quietly and gathered a flower, and murmured—

"Do you?" in her ordinary tone. "I am quite ready to sit for you," she added, a minute or two afterwards; "and you must leave one of your best sketches for papa."

She stood calm and motionless as a statue before him, although her heart was nigh to breaking; and none but a clever artist would have detected the terrible anguish that dilated the azure pupils, or noticed that the lines of the sweet mobile features were rigid and set with misery.

Seymour could not bear it long.

"I have finished; let us take a last walk round the garden."

She obeyed in silence, mechanically putting up the drawing materials; but her hands visibly trembled, notwithstanding her efforts to steady them; and there was a piteous quiver on her little mouth.

Suddenly she looked up, and their eyes met; and in a second she was in his arms, whilst he pressed a long kiss upon her cold brow. Only the word "Good-bye!" fell from his lips.

"Good-bye!" and Ethie swallowed her sobs; and with a mute despair saw him pass out of the gate. Once he looked back and caught the girl's sorrow-struck gaze; but she quickly turned away until he was out of sight. Then down upon the grass, amidst the golden blossom, she lay for hours in tearless grief, realizing that "life was a mistake" after all.

Day after day Ethie stood by that garden-wall, watching and waiting for tidings; but they came not. Her face grew pallid, and her form shadowy, and she looked as though a puff of wind would blow her into her place amongst the angels.

"Only a paper," was the answer to her usual query

for letters; and "only a paper" brought her death-warrant at last.

"At St. Mary's, on the 4th October, Ernest Seymour, to Alice, only daughter of John Wynter, Esq., of Orton Hall, Lincolnshire."

An hour after they found Ethie in a dead faint on the ground, with the paper in her grasp.

When the first snowdrops reared their white heads, poor little Ethie was at rest beneath them.

Just a dream, but her life had ended with it!





MY SISTER ALICE.

PART I.

HOW the time flies ! I can scarcely believe that it is nearly two years ago since I sat on the very same chair I am occupying now, and became an involuntary eavesdropper to a lovers' quarrel between my sister Alice and Dick Oswald. Dear old Dick ! how she, or any one else, could possibly fall out with any one so thoroughly amiable, I never could comprehend. Gentle as a woman, frank as a child, and handsome as Adonis was Dick ; and yet the only being in whose good graces he was desirous to establish himself, was the very one who appeared the most difficult to please ; and that was my sister Alice. Well, perhaps she had a right to be a little capricious and wilful, that is if an extraordinary claim to beauty could give her that right ; and she was as haughty as an empress, wielding her sceptre imperiously over her slaves, whose name was legion.

My father, the Rev. John Grey, a quiet unobtrusive man, was the vicar of Marsefield ; and as Marsefield was not a very large place, to be its vicar was a post more honourable than lucrative. But his means were amply sufficient for our household, which was

carried on in a modest fashion. My mother died when I and my sister were quite young—so young, that we have no distinct remembrance of her, except that some one with a pleasant smile used to pat our heads approvingly when we lisped out our prayers morning and night. Alice came of age last June. She was born in the loveliest of summer months, and perhaps that is partly the reason that she is as bright and beautiful as a flower; but I, Susan, came into the world two years after her, in dreary bleak March, when the winds howled so piteously over my advent, that the poor little snowdrops bent their heads beneath the fury of the blast, and drooped and paled away.

We lived very quietly at the parsonage, which was a pretty quaint old house, one mass of luxuriant ivy trails and wild roses. The “feast of reason and the flow of soul” were far more in consonance with our pockets than turtle and Cliquot; but on festive occasions, such as Christmas or New Year’s Day, we were accustomed to put the unassuming reception-room into holiday attire, and to gather together the party-goers of Marsefield, in order that we might tread the “light fantastic toe,” to the best fiddle procurable, accompanied by the piano, which was touched with more willingness than skill by our lady-friends in turn.

Last Christmas Eve but one, after Alice and I had laboured hard in preparation for one of our *soirées dansantes*, the name by which we were pleased to dignify our carpet hops, and which was to take place on the day after Christmas Day—that day, of course, being spent by us in the quietude of our domestic circle—my sister and I sat down to have a “nice chat.” I was very partial to those little *tête-à-têtes* with her, for when she was in one of her good moods,

as we used to call them, no one could be more amusing and pleasant. Alice had been out so much in the world, and although that world was only the stupid Marsefield one, its grandeur was magnified very considerably by me, an invalid and a stay-at-home. We had not many visitors, but amongst those who used to call most frequently were Arthur Farquhar and Dick Oswald. And both were in love with Alice. The former was the eldest son of the member for our county, who lived in a grand mansion that we could just catch a glimpse of from our top window. The Farquhars had a long pedigree and well-lined coffers, so that Arthur Farquhar was a good *parti*, and he was handsome as well, with thin straight-cut features, and fair Saxon hair and beard; but there was an expression in his eyes which I distrusted, and a cynical smile on his lips which put me in mind always of a man dressed in red, with a big feather stuck in his cap, who acted the part of Mephistopheles in a burlesque of *Faust*, that was done by a company of strolling players in a booth at Marsefield a great many years ago. The whole thing is stamped on my memory by the fact of my having been locked up in an empty store-room, with no companions save mice, of which I have an inordinate dread, as a punishment for having stolen out to indulge the curiosity I felt to see a theatre.

I used to tell my sister frankly my impression of Arthur Farquhar, but she only smiled and bade me not be such a little fool as to disparage such an eligible suitor. But I did not mind, for I knew quite well that in her heart she agreed with me, and in spite of his attentions and flattery, doubted his sincerity; besides, although it was kept a secret because it was her fancy to do so, she was betrothed to Dick

Oswald, who was only a clerk in a merchant's house, struggling to gain enough money to keep himself and a wife whenever Alice chose to marry him. But what did it signify about his poverty, when the heart he gave her was so honest and loving? It never entered my brain about any one ever demanding my hand in marriage. I had no vanity, and if such a feeling had sprung up within me, it would have been extinguished in its infancy, for I could not fail hearing at times such remarks as these: "How strange that one sister should be as ugly as the other is beautiful!" or "Susan has no beauty to boast of, certainly; but she is very good-natured, poor thing!" Still, when I used sometimes to see Dick, with his big brown eyes worshipping Alice, I could not help repining a little that such pleasant incense would never be mine. But to return to my story.

Very tired (for Alice had only suggested, while I had carried out, the decorations of the room), with my arms resting on the table in an attitude savouring far more of ease than of elegance, and with my feet stretched out as near the fire as my modest stature allowed of, I sat looking at my sister, who was opposite me, with admiration in my eyes in spite of my sleepiness.

Alice leant back in a huge arm-chair, the crimson of which formed a rich background for her face, on which the firelight fell freely. Her thick chestnut hair was gathered carelessly right off her temples, and hung over her shoulders in a dishevelled mass. Her features were exquisite, but tiny, excepting her eyes, and they were large and soft, like a gazelle's, and of a deep violet. Upon her lap lay a note, with a grand coat-of-arms in red and gold adorning the envelope,



and beside it a bunch of rare exotics, whose perfume filled the warm room. And on her white finger sparkled a brilliant of the first water, which she kept admiring and holding up so as to catch the light. She irritated me at last; and shaking off my indolence, I roused myself to speak as wrathfully to her as I dared; for my sister was not given to meekness, and she ruled me right royally.

"Alice, how can you keep looking at that ring? It is my opinion that you ought to have returned it with an angry note directly it came."

"Is it, indeed, puss in boots?" laughed my sister. "Don't you know that children should only speak when spoken to?"

Considering I was nineteen, although my diminutive proportions did not indorse that fact, it seemed hard to be treated like an infant, but I plucked up courage and resumed—

"What business had Mr. Farquhar to send you that, I should like to know?"

"Should you, indeed? Well, then, I will tell you. He sent it because he knew I should admire it, as I do." And she began dancing the hateful bauble backwards and forwards before her eyes, until they seemed to catch all the glitter of the diamond.

"But you do not intend keeping it, of course," I asserted confidently.

"Of course but I shall, little goose; what is to prevent my doing so?"

"Dick wouldn't like it," I pleaded coaxingly. I was very partial to my brother-in-law in prospect, and I did not care to have his feelings tortured, as they often were by his lady-love.

"Dick wouldn't like it!" Alice said, sneeringly

mocking my words, and pursing up her pretty scarlet lips like a spoilt baby. "Pray, has Dick lost his tongue, that you are always advocating his cause, and trying to keep his feelings in a glass case, so that nothing shall ruffle them? Susan, I wish you would leave me and Dick to settle matters without your interference."

"Very well," I replied, with tears of mortification at her unkindness obscuring my vision. "Here he is!" as a familiar pull at the bell announced the visitor; and I could not help adding spitefully, "I wonder if he will admire the ring as much as you do."

"He will, when he sees it," she laughed, and while she put out one hand to her lover with an innocent face, with the other she quietly deposited both note and ring into her pocket, and stole a triumphant glance at me while she did so, I wondered how, caring for Dick as she undoubtedly did, she could be guilty of duplicity towards him, but my sister's nature was often an enigma to me.

Dick sat down in as close proximity as he could to the object of his affection; but as that was his usual habit, I did not consider it incumbent on me to leave the room, but leaning my weary head on my arms, I closed my lids; my ears were, however, open.

"Darling," and Dick's voice, always soft and low, appeared to sound doubly musical as he uttered the word of endearment, "do you know that we have not met for three days" (he had been up to London), "and that you have not even looked at me yet?" he said, reproachfully.

Alice was not in one of her good moods, evidently; and her tone was very cold and unsympathetic as she answered—

"Why should I look at you? I know the exact colour of your hair and the shape of your nose as well as my A B C! You always want me to be looking at you, or something!" and she seized her bouquet pettishly, and began examining the varied blossoms of which it was composed.

Dick must have felt aggrieved, but he was of a very patient and forbearing nature, and he was exempt from the vanity that most of his sex possess; otherwise he would have sorely resented her words and the tone in which they were uttered. His gaze followed hers, I concluded, for he exclaimed in suspicious accents—

"Where did those flowers come from, Alice? They are not the produce of Marsefield, I am sure."

I glanced up quietly, and unnoticed by them. My sister dropped the bouquet into her lap indifferently, and she remained silent and perfectly passive, even when Dick seized the offending flowers and flung them into the fire, and watched the lovely petals of the rare exotics turn into little shrivelled masses, and then into nothingness. When they were gone for ever, he turned and spoke hastily and passionately.

"Alice, who gave you those flowers? Tell me at once, for I have a right to know!"

"I deny your right to question me completely," my sister replied, haughtily. "But I have no objection to satisfy your curiosity; it was Mr. Farquhar who sent them to me."

Poor Dick grew so deadly white, probably from pangs of jealousy, that I feared he would have fallen off his seat, and I was on the point of offering a restorative when I saw him "pull himself up" like a man, while the colour stole slowly back to his cheek.

"Alice, you know how much I love you, and that there is nothing in the world I would not suffer for your sake, but I will not be trifled with. If Mr. Farquhar's bouquets are acceptable to you, take them by all means, and take the donor as well, if you wish it; but let your intentions be aboveboard; give me my dismissal. It is unworthy of you to coquet with two men; and if Farquhar can bear it, I cannot. I have often watched your manners towards him, and my very soul has been torn with jealousy. If I am not good enough or wealthy enough for you, marry him by all means, and joy go with you," he wound up angrily, with two big scarlet spots on his cheeks and his eyes blazing fiercely. My sister looked up at him with astonishment and admiration in her glance. It was the first time he had bravely asserted himself, and womanlike, she prized him doubly when there was a chance of losing him. She threw off her grandiose style and grew soft. Now many women are very soft and pleasant. But the "softness" of Alice was an exceptional thing. My sister's large violet eyes waxed wondrously lovely when they pleaded, and it was impossible to resist their fascination. So, as a matter of course, Dick succumbed and became her most obedient before a dozen words had fallen from her lips. Men, as a rule, are slaves to beauty, so after all he was only following in the lead of his sex.

"Dear old Dick!" I heard Alice murmur in her most liquid accents quite close into his ear; and to insure her victory she slipped a little white hand into his. "Do you not know that I have only been trying you, to see if you *could* be dignified and angry? Don't you know that I love you with all my heart, and only flirt a bit now and then just to make you jealous? For I

like you to be jealous, Dick ; it is a proof that you really care for me ; and you do care for me, don't you ?”

“Care for you, my own ! a thousand times better than myself !” he answered fervently. But I kept my face hidden in case I might see my sister's blushes as she let him rain down kisses on her.

“Alice, you will not flirt with Farquhar any more, my child ? Promise you wont !” he implored ; and any one could have known how earnest he was by the way his voice shook when he preferred his request.

“No, Dick, I wont. And if I do, I give you permission to punish me by leaving me for ever,” she exclaimed, with so much more feeling in her tones than she usually had, that I thoroughly believed in her assertion.

Then there was more embracing intermixed with endearing words ; and suddenly he remembered that there was a third party in the room.

“What must she think of all this ?” he whispered audibly enough for me to hear him.

“Nothing. I believe she is sound asleep, and has not heard a word.”

I looked up and smiled triumphantly, and Alice fully understood that I had been a witness to her “giving-in” to Dick, a thing which she would never allow she did ; but she did not flash out as was her wont when vexed.

“Never mind ; it is *only* Susan after all, you know,” she remarked indifferently, as though I had been a table or a chair ; and resenting being treated as a nonentity, I rose up, and saying “good-night,” stalked out of the room with my head up in the air,

but not before I heard my sister say, "She is such a good little thing, Dick; but what a pity she is so plain! She will never feel the happiness of being loved, as I do, Dick; and I am sure no one will ever care to marry poor Susan."

I went slowly up the stairs with Alice's words ringing in my ears, and dropped off to sleep with a heavy heart. And then I dreamed that I was Cinderella, and that a beautiful prince, in the disguise of our large tabby cat, had come to woo me.

Christmas Day broke in wet and dreary, but passed off quietly between morning and evening services and excellent fare; and on the following day Alice and I were up with the lark, and busy as bees in preparation for our guests. There were holly decorations with a sprig of mistletoe peeping out slyly here and there, and wonderful barley-sugar castles and pastry ramparts to erect. Our education in the domestic arts had not been neglected, and Alice's dainty hands were as skilful as my own in the concoction of savoury dishes. By the time the evening shadows had fallen, and the only thing visible through the darkness were feathery snowflakes hanging on to the garden rails and the leafless boughs, the parsonage was a blaze of light, and my sister and I, arrayed in our best attire, were ready to receive the company. Alice looked peerlessly lovely that night. She wore a black gauzy dress that floated around her in big dark waves, and showed up the purity and delicacy of her white neck and shoulders, and into her bright hair she had put some vivid scarlet berries, woven into a wreath with deep-hued glistening holly-leaves. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were red like cherries. As for me, in a plain muslin, whose chief recommendation was its freshness, and



with some pale snowdrops in my black hair, I presented a more comely appearance than usual ; and after I had danced once or twice, the colour came into my face, and Dick told me that I was looking quite pretty. Young Mr. Craven, my father's new curate, seemed to think so too, for whenever I sat out I found him beside me, and conversing of books and music ; the evening was a very pleasant one to me.

But about my sister Alice.

Late in the evening Mr. Farquhar arrived. My father had met him in the town, and invited him ; and in all the glory of irreproachable toilette, he walked into our modest room as though he felt himself to be the grandee of the party : and I hated him more, because somehow he seemed to throw both Dick and Mr. Craven into the shade with his airs and graces. Still it was hard to blame him for making my sister the object of undisguised attention, for, as I said before, her engagement to Dick Oswald was kept a secret, according to her expressed desire ; but Alice was certainly to blame for accepting his devotion with sparkling eyes, proud to display even to the Marsefield people her potency over the other sex. Waltz after waltz, while Dick, ashy pale and the picture of wretchedness, remained in a distant corner, Alice, with Mr. Farquhar's arm encircling her waist and with his bold gaze upon her beautiful face, whirled past where he sat ; but elated with her evident conquest, and lost in a love of admiration, my sister never so much as recollected the existence of her affianced husband, until as she was walking past me, I touched her hand, and whispered " Dick."

" Oh, where on earth is he ?" she whispered back ;

but just at the moment Arthur Farquhar spoke some compliment and diverted her attention, and I saw Dick leave the room and rush into the garden ; and peeping out I watched him pacing up and down the walk, indifferent to the cold. Poor fellow, his heart beating fast kept him warm and circulated the blood in his veins.

At last the party was over, and Mr. Farquhar, the last to leave, said a lingering good-night to Alice, who, in spite of the weather, stood at the door. A pallid face out in the darkness witnessed the leave-taking ; and then, when my sister and I found ourselves alone, she at last thought of Dick.

"Where is Dick?" she asked in languid accents, but all the while she kept pulling on her glove hurriedly without being aware that a pair of eyes had never lost sight of her since her whispered adieu at the door.

"I am here!" said a hard voice, and what looked like a ghost of Dick Oswald rushed quickly into the room, and seizing her hand, tore off the glove, revealing in all its beauty and brilliancy the hateful diamond ring. Its lustre danced before my gaze and sickened me. I loathed the cold bright stone, for it reminded me of Arthur Farquhar's glance.

"Alice, what does this mean?" and Dick, frantic with suspicion and jealousy, grasped her hand so hard that she cried out from sheer pain.

Defiant and angry at his violence, she lost all self-control.

"It means that Mr. Farquhar gave me this ring, and that until he replaces it by one plainer but more binding, this shall never leave my finger! I have borne with your jealousy and temper long enough,

Mr. Oswald ; and the dismissal you asked for the other day is granted, and I have the honour to wish you good-bye !” And she ‘dropped him a low courtesy with a mocking smile on her curved lips.

Dick dropped her hand and stared wildly at her with dilated eyes ; then, without answering a word, he quietly picked up his hat, which he had thrown on the floor, and walked out of the house.

There was a dead silence for some seconds, whilst we could hear his tread on the garden-walk that was crisp with snow. Then Alice snatched the ring off her finger and threw it with all her might to the further end of the room, and flinging herself into a chair, burst into a loud fit of hysterics that would have disturbed the neighbourhood if we had not lived in rather an out-of-the-way spot. Fearing she would rouse up my father, whose health was far from robust, I threw a shawl over her and drew her into the garden, and the cold air calmed her a little and paled her flushed cheeks ; but the grey dawn was streaking the sky before she ceased her sobs and fell into an unquiet slumber. I dreaded the awakening, for I knew my sister’s excitable temperament, and I pitied her for having given up real gold for mere dross. By the flickering light of a small lamp I saw her breast heaving with sorrow, even in her sleep, and her exquisite features all stained with tears ; and as I unloosed my hair before the glass and noticed my poor pale face, insignificant and unattractive, I was consoled for being so ugly by the thought that beauty did not always bring happiness in its train, and that my sister Alice, lying there a picture of perfect loveliness, was less to be envied than “ poor plain Susan.”

PART II.

ALICE awoke to a full consciousness of her loss. It was evident that Dick, aroused to a conviction of her inconstancy, had left her for ever. Early in the morning I had despatched a trusty messenger to the hotel which he made his head-quarters whenever he visited Marsefield, and had heard to my dismay that he had left for the metropolis by the first train. I could not help crying for vexation and disappointment, for somehow I had deluded myself with the hope that he would at any rate strain an effort to see my sister once more, and that, penitent and mild, she would give him the "soft answer that turneth away wrath." And yet I could not help respecting and liking Dick for having had the courage to leave, for the only flaw in him, in my estimation, was a certain little weakness of character.

I thought it best to mention to Alice that he was gone, although I trembled lest a volley of reproaches should be launched on me for having interfered in the matter in any way; but poor Alice under her despair was as meek as one of our lambs; and in lieu of firing up, she turned her face away, and lay quite still for a long, long while. About midday the sound of horses' feet at the door fell upon our ears. It was Mr. Farquhar's groom, and the missive he brought was as follows:—

"DEAREST ALICE,—Last night on my leaving, you looked into my eyes, and when I pressed your hand you did not repel me; nay, you allowed me to place a ring upon your finger. With such encouragement,

I cannot doubt the happy fact that you love me ; but I long to hear your lips confirm my belief. One word to bid me hasten to you.—Your devoted A. F.”

My sister had begun to read out the note slowly, but towards the end her voice grew almost metallic and disagreeable, while her eyes flashed like sapphires, and a big round scarlet spot appeared on both her cheeks. She tore the paper into a dozen bits, and scattering them on the ground she bade me give her pen and ink, and with shaking fingers she dashed off her reply :—

“Last night was the ruin of my happiness. For the miserable gratification of a petty vanity, I lost all that made existence worth having. If I looked into your eyes, it was because, like serpent’s glances, they fascinated for a while, to be feared and loathed for ever afterwards. If I allowed you to press my hand, I would that I could cut it off, and cast it into oblivion. I do not love you, Mr. Farquhar ; nay, I hate you, for you are the cause of a life-sorrow to A. G.”

I listened aghast as she poured out the words loudly and passionately ; and asked her if she were mad to write that which could only evoke malice and revenge ; but she silenced my expostulations contemptuously.

“Go and find the ring at once, Susan,” was her imperious command ; and obedient, according to habit, I went and searched the drawing-room ; and, after crawling on all fours like a cat for some time, I discovered the trinket glistening in a dark corner.

She took it from me with a shudder, and adding, “I return the ring—a symbol of a hateful bondage which my nature would never submit to,” she closed and sealed the packet ; and saying, “Mind, Susan, that subject is dead to us for ever,” she flung herself

back on her pillow, and closed her eyes with a sigh of relief.

I wondered what Mr. Farquhar would think of his love-letter; but we never heard of him again until three months had elapsed, when he brought home an Italian bride—a beautiful woman with fierce black eyes and dusky tints, and the very opposite of Alice.

We heard nothing of Dick Oswald either; so that Alice could not but believe that the very memory of her existence had passed out of his mind. She grew very quiet, and crept about the house like a mouse, all through the cold spring. Summer came with its bright sun and gay flowers; but her cheek did not catch their glowing hues, and her pretty eyes lost a good deal of their light. She became more devout than had been her wont; never missing the services, week-days and Sundays, in spite of any inclemency of weather. And, strange to say, her beauty seemed more perfect under the shadow that had fallen upon it than in its pristine brilliancy and freshness.

We were not often alone in the evening, for young Mr. Craven, the curate, had fallen into the habit of dropping in just like Dick used to do; and listening to his pleasant converse my sister Alice seemed to forget the past and to grow more contented with her lot, though at night I used to fancy sometimes that a sound like sobbing issued from her room, but in the morning she would laugh away my fears, and bid me not vex myself about her. After a while I began to forget her trouble in one of my own. True, I was plain, and knew that no one was likely to care for me; but that disagreeable conviction did not prevent my heart having feelings like my fellow-mortals. Evening after evening, ensconced in a quiet corner, I used to

sit and listen to Mr. Craven's low voice until it entered into my soul, and I thought that if those tones were all the music that was to be vouchsafed me, I would fain be satisfied. I never dreamed that those tones would ever warm towards me, yet when the idea flashed into my brain that they would breathe words of affection to another woman, I felt myself the most unhappy wretch on earth.

Did Henry Craven love my sister, or not? This was the question that tortured my breast hourly, and I could not answer it satisfactorily to myself. At last, weary with suspense and anxiety, I began to steal away from the room when I heard his footstep on the gravel-path that led up from the gate; and although I yearned to gaze on the beloved face, I felt I could not bear to see it full of tenderness for another than myself. I grew like a little white ghost, with a thin wan face, out of which my black eyes looked big and weird-like; and all that I had cared for all my life, my birds and flowers, even the blessed sunshine, became distasteful to my sight. I was certain that Alice divined my suffering, but in lieu of pitying me or trying to soften my grief, she was wont to smile at me until I felt irritated at her unkindness, and strove to shun her presence as well. Ten long days passed away, and not once during that period had I seen or spoken to Mr. Craven, studiously watching for his coming that I might escape from any chance of meeting him.

One evening—how well I remember it—the warmth of summer, the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, the light of myriads of stars all made it pleasant, but I was weary and listless, recking nothing of externals, only feeling what a burden life had become to me in

the latter days. I knew that my father had gone into his study, leaving my sister and Mr. Craven together, and jealous and miserable I sat at my open window, with my hair pushed away from my temples that the soft air might fan away the throbbing, and with my hands covering my eyes. Alice stole up to me of a sudden and drew them away, and in the half light I could see the old, old mocking smile upon her red lips that she always wore whenever she was vexed or amused.

"Susan, what are you doing here all alone, little one?" she asked me kindly.

"I have a headache," I answered languidly, and to prove my words I leant my brow back on the window frame. She bent down and kissed it.

"Susan, don't be such a hypocrite; you know it's not a headache, but a heartache that you are suffering from!" and she peered curiously into my tell-tale face.

"Alice, don't tease me," I replied pettishly, and I tried to rise, but she held me down tight.

"Susan, do you remember when we were little children, how you used to worry me to tell you a pretty tale that you could think about and dream about; and I used to relate wonderful stories all about the loves of fairies and sprites, that delighted you? We are older now, but that is no reason why I shouldn't tell you a love story about mortals that you will enjoy listening to; so I am going to commence." And she seated herself on the broad sill, and put her arm round me. "Once upon a time——"

I interrupted her with an involuntary "Oh!" It was the exclamation of a pained heart, for I knew she was going to tell me that Mr. Craven loved her, and

that she, forgetting Dick Oswald, loved him in return. She did not notice the exclamation, and went on :

“There were two sisters, one was pretty and the other was good ; but with the usual folly of the world, there were more admirers of beauty than of goodness. The good sister was as modest as a violet, and sooner than display her excellence, she would hide in dark places like this.” And Alice pinched my arm to give a point to her remark. “But all rules have exceptions—*vide* Lindley Murray’s Grammar—and therefore among the fools who worshipped beauty, there was one wise man who sought goodness, and longed to possess her for his very own.”

I listened with strained eyes and flushed cheeks, and a great flood of warmth and light seemed to come rushing into my heart.

“Susan, must I finish the story, or can you guess the end ? For all this while the wise man is kicking his heels downstairs, waiting to know if goodness is going to crown his days with bliss.”

“Alice !” I could not say more. I felt as if a ball in my throat was choking me ; but I let her take me down to the drawing-room, and push me in, and then she closed the door.

I stood with my eyes downcast, in the attitude of a penitent school-girl, knowing that I was alone with *him*, but never daring to look at him. He must have come towards me on tip-toe, or else in the perturbation of my heart I never heard his step, for before another minute was passed, both my hands were in his, and his voice was saying—

“So you have come to me at last, Susan. Am I so hateful in your eyes that you could not bear to look upon me ?”

Hurt at his words, I glanced up into his face. Something in that glance made him smile.

"Susan, has Alice pleaded my cause well? Has she told you that I have placed my hopes of happiness in these little hands, and that unless they clasp my own in all love and faith, I shall be a miserable man?" And he pressed his lips to my trembling fingers.

I stood in a dream. Susan, "poor plain Susan," was being courted with all the earnestness and delicate flattery that a "beauty" might have expected. But he did not let me dream very long.

"Do you love me, little one, or have I deceived myself?"

I do not know what I said, but I must have answered something, for my bewildered head was pressed against his breast, and I felt a kiss fall softly on my hot forehead.

"And you love me enough to become my wife?" he whispered.

He had to guess how much I loved him, after all; for I could never have told him if I had talked all day and night. But he was quite satisfied; and after a little while we were sitting side by side on the sofa, with Alice opposite to us, congratulating us on our happiness. As I looked at her lovely face, I wondered how Henry Craven had deigned to notice me; but the next moment I met my darling's eyes, and in that glance faith and trust unspeakable were born, and jealousy died out of my heart for ever.

Courtship at Marsefield went smoothly, and before many weeks were over I became Henry Craven's wife, but still an inmate of my old home, for my father, whose pet I had always been, could not bear me to leave

him, and preferred gaining a son to losing a daughter. We lived more quietly than ever, for my sister Alice was not so strong as in days of yore, and she shrank from strangers and gaiety, devoting herself to her books and music. The summer had come a second time since that fatal Christmas party that had spoilt her life for her, and thinking that fresh breezes might blow a little colour into her cheeks and lips, I persuaded my father to send her away with my husband to the nearest seaside, while I took the reins of domestic government entirely into my own hands; and I saw her start from home with a strong hope that the change would be beneficial to her.

It was three days after their arrival at Eastbourne that she and Henry arm-in-arm faced Dick Oswald on the beach. Alice, clinging close to my husband, turned ashy pale, and Henry, unconscious of the cause of her agitation, bent anxiously over her, believing she was ill.

Dick Oswald passed them, and then, with a strange sort of defiance written on his face, he walked up to Henry and held out his hand.

"I heard of your marriage, Mr. Craven, and am glad of an opportunity of congratulating you," he said in a hard tone, but never looking towards Alice. My husband, aware of my sister's former engagement to him and her grief at losing him, accepted his overtures cordially, and after a few moments, invited him to pass an hour in the evening with them. Dick must have been determined to face everything, and to shut his heart against his unfortunate attachment, for after a second's hesitation he assented to the proposition.

Alice told me when she came home, how, when the evening gloom was stealing over the sea, and the low murmur of the plashing waves was all the sound that fell upon the ear, she sat looking out dreamily on the one bright streak of light that marked the horizon, while a strange calm, such as her heart had not known for months, came over her in spite of the natural excitement of her nerves in meeting with her old love once more. Then footsteps at the door, and yet she never turned, although the footfall was a well-remembered one, and then a familiar voice, trembling just a little, saying to her—

“ Good evening, Mrs. Craven.”

Alice started as the name was uttered, and was on the point of replying, but instead of words, the old smile hovered on her mouth, and she simply offered her hand in return for his greeting. But whether it was too dark, or his feelings warred against it, Dick ignored her amiable action, and retreating to a distant chair, commenced an ordinary conversation until Henry and lights relieved him from his awkward *tête-à-tête*.

“ The night is superb and the sea as calm as a fish-pond,” Dick ventured by way of an original remark. “ I don’t wonder Mrs. Craven enjoys looking out,” he added, in a tone of vexation that he should find himself an object of perfect indifference to one who yet ruled his whole soul.

“ Mrs. Craven !” ejaculated my husband. The next moment he divined the mistake under which his guest was labouring, and pitying him, determined to correct it at once. “ Mrs. Craven ! why, she is probably reading the *Times* to her father, or else going quietly to bed at Marsefield by this hour. And, by

the way, I must not let the evening pass without writing her a line. I'll be back directly." And casting a look at Alice's still averted head, he walked out of the room.

"Alice, what on earth does he mean?" and Dick, eager and breathless, knelt at her feet. "Who is Mrs. Craven?"

"My sister."

"What, poor plain Susan?"

"Poor plain Susan; but in spite of her plainness, the dearly-beloved wife of an excellent man."

"And you, Alice, are you free? or is Arthur Farquhar still dear to you?"

"I hate him!" my sister flashed out bitterly; and the scorn in her eyes confirmed her assertion. "Yes, *hate* him! for through him I have passed weary days and miserable nights; and hope and happiness have left me for ever."

"For ever, Alice? Even if we two should be together once more as in the old, old days, when this face rested on my heart, and these sweet lips said they loved me? Oh, Alice, my life, my darling, let them say it to me once more, and I will bless you from my soul!"

Down went my sister's head upon its old resting-place, which must have made a very uneasy pillow, seeing that Dick's heart was beating at ten knots an hour; and the pretty lips, that could smile so softly when they pleased, murmured, "I love you, Dick!"

It was enough. All the misery of the past months was carried out of memory by the bliss of the present; and Alice, grown wiser, eschewed the rock of flirtation on which she had so nearly been wrecked.

And now, on Christmas Eve, I am sitting before a glorious fire, while my husband opposite is buried in

the columns of a debate, and up a flight of stairs, in a tiny cot, a rosy-cheeked scion of the Cravens slumbers peacefully and sound. I am very tired, for I have been busy in preparation all day ; for to-morrow, to pass Christmas at her old home, Alice and Dick Oswald return from their honeymoon.

THE END.



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